OWARIMONOGATARI

END TALE PART 02

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

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VERTICAL.

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Art by VOFAN

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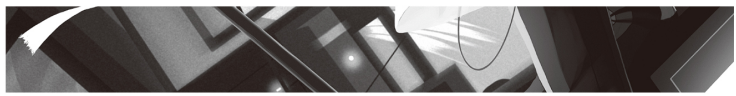

OWARIMONOGATARI, PART 02

ISBN 978-1-947194-92-2

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First published in Japan in 2014 by
Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
Publication rights for this English edition
arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

Published by Vertical, an imprint of
Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC., 2020

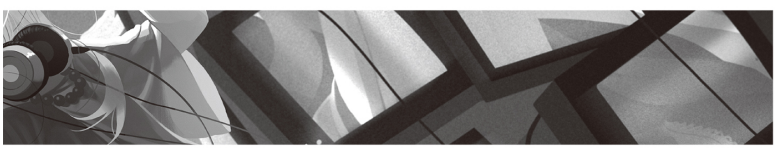
Manufactured in the United States
of America

First Edition

Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC.
451 Park Avenue South,
7th Floor
New York, NY 10016

www.vertical-inc.com

CHAPTER FOUR SHINOBU MAIL



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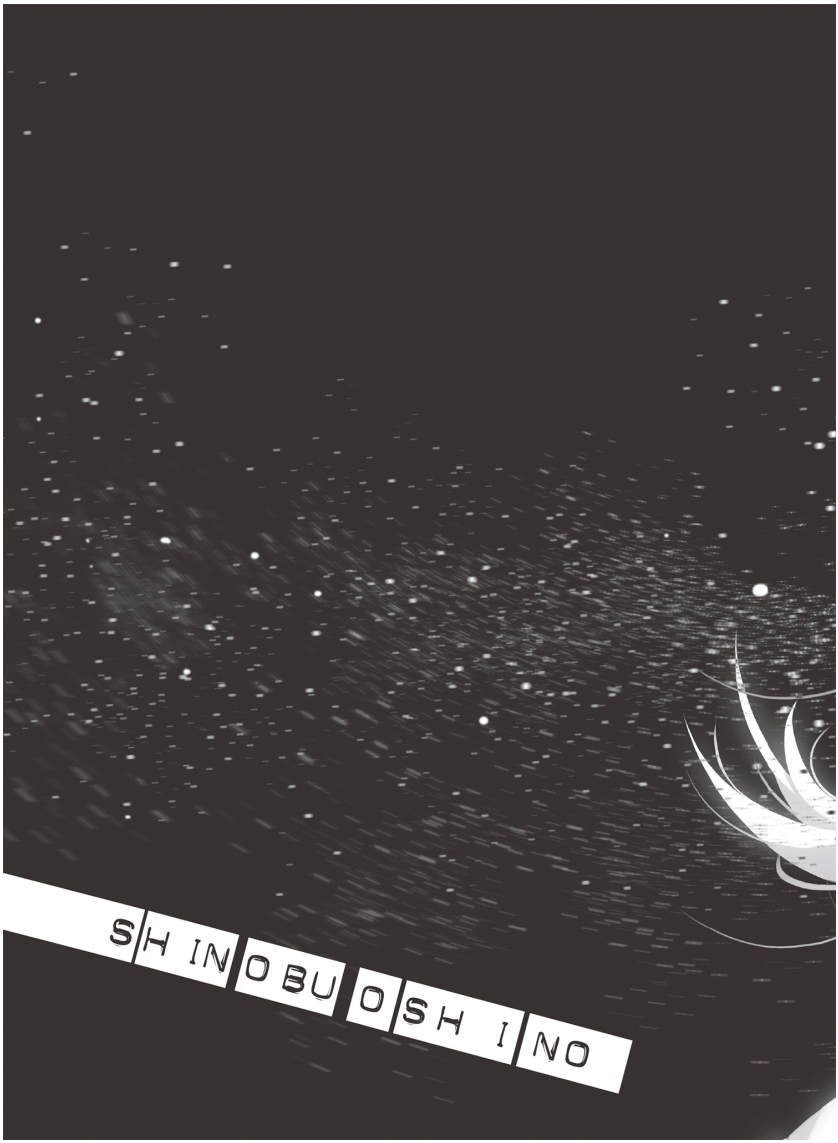
SHINOBU OSHINO

001

If only it wasn't for Ogi Oshino. I can't help but think that when I try to summarize the back half of my senior year—I mean, I seriously want to think so. There's no need to go on and on about how the antics of this girl, who transferred into Naoetsu High as a freshman during second term, ravaged and savaged my adolescence. All that needs to be said is—if only it wasn't for Ogi Oshino.

I do realize, fully, that this is a selfish, shameful, and lameful act of blame-shifting—I say it knowing that. If only it wasn't for Ogi Oshino? What a foolish and foolhardy argument, I ought to feel like killing myself the moment I think of it, no need for you to point that out, I'm well aware. To begin with, even if she never existed, it's hard to imagine the back half of my senior year being all that different, though it couldn't have been identical. There was something untenable about my style from the start—clearly, one day, I would hit my limit. Experts of all kinds had pointed this out to me plenty of times, after all. My indecisive self was going to have to pay the painful, scathing price for riding the fence to the end, for pretending to overlook it all, for not seeing anything through or resolutely stepping out on my own. My karma being visited upon me was inevitable, not anything supernatural but rather the perfectly natural fact of the way of the world.

Ogi Oshino isn't to blame.

Koyomi Araragi is.

But then, if it wasn't for me, if only I didn't exist, would this, that, and everything have proceeded in a good, correct manner? I don't think you could say that at all either. Good and correct, what would that be in the first place? What does that even mean? If only it wasn't for Koyomi Araragi—if you were to ask me if anything would be different were the wish granted, I'd have to shake my head no.

Even if I wasn't around, someone else would have saved Hitagi Senjogahara—and, no doubt, guided Mayoi Hachikuji—saved Suruga Kanbaru, Nadeko Sengoku, Tsubasa Hanekawa, all of them, and possibly in a far defter way than I ever did. Sure, I played a part in their fate, but nothing at all said it had to be me—we're talking about girls as strong, as tough, as determined as them. The truth is that their lives didn't require me.

When they happened to cross paths—it was with me, that's all.

Just like encountering a yokai on the street at night, or to be particular, the way I encountered, during spring break, a golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire with her limbs torn off as I was walking down a street. So it's nothing. Even before I became a vampire, I was already something of a cryptid.

When I think about it now, rather than me playing a part in their fate, it seems much more like I got them mixed up in my own irascible fate.

If only it wasn't for Koyomi Araragi.

In fact, maybe that's what those girls think—I think I've twisted so many people's fates that I couldn't blame them if they did.

No.

It wasn't their fates—but tales that I twisted.

And now I was having to deal with the repercussions—you could say like an eraser being flung away by a curved and bent ruler trying to straighten itself out. An eraser flying so far, who knows where it'll land—an eraser that flies out of the classroom window and falls into a flower bed, never to be found again as it crumbles away.

That must make Ogi Oshino the ruler.

Straight and precise.

An intransigent rule of a ruler.

I was wondering why she'd appeared before me, what for—but it

must've been to draw a line, like a ruler.

She'd come to draw the line.

To give me a clear standard, that here and beyond was no good, that up to here was okay, not allowing a margin of error of even a fraction of an inch. Mayoi Hachikuji and Nadeko Sengoku were on the other side of the line, while Tsubasa Hanekawa and Sodachi Oikura were on this side of the line. As simple as that.

A borderline?

No, a goal line.

There was no room for straddling the line or judgment calls. That was like calling for war.

"Well, it wouldn't be logical□you know, as in l-Ogi-cal?"

And so.

Now that the presence of Ogi Oshino, who brazenly interrupts even my prologue, the only place where I can show off this time around, has been re-introduced… Sadly the tale that I'm presenting for the sake of the end of the end of the end doesn't begin on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where I met Mayoi Hachikuji again. Before we can begin the endgame and be all at the end-all, there's just one more tale left that I must reveal to you. My dear readers, don't tell me you've forgotten.

I wish you had, frankly, and even more that I have□then I'd be able to close out my tale, furtively, meekly hiding that it ever happened.

"Way too tall of an order, Araragi-senpai□did you really think you could hide something from me? I wish you wouldn't be so reckless. I'm the nemesis of lies and deception. A predator who preys on procrastination and postponement. Even you must know what happened to Deishu Kaiki, that superlative con man, right? So please, start talking unless you want to end up like him. About what happened then□the story you've so obstinately covered up for all this time," Ogi Oshino says, pressing herself against me. Psychologically.

Judging by the looks of her, she already knows everything about what happened then, but if I were to ask her, she'd feign ignorance for sure.

"I don't know anything—you're the one who knows, Araragi-senpai."

She'd be right.

I do know—I know so very well.

Of course, that's why I wanted to hide it.

But that's why I have to tell it.

This is going to be a long one, I tell her.

"Fine with me. That's why, in between the first and last parts of this title, I crammed in—sorry, prepared a middle part for you," Ogi says nonsensically.

I won't ask her what that's supposed to mean—I could find the same question shot straight back at me.

After all, I'm about to talk about something that makes even less sense, an incident that happened more than two months before she transferred into my school.

Right after summer break ended and second term started.

The tale begins with Koyomi Araragi's experience of being almost fully "human" for the first time in half a year, after having his link to a vampire severed. Going neither to school nor his home and instead spending what seems like more time than he knows what to do with hiding out in a classroom of the ruined cram school where the expert Mèmè Oshino once made his roost—that's where the tale begins. Or that's from where it ends.

And his life.

His long-running life, too—comes at last to an end.

002

“What up, senpai! Long time no see!”

I feel I should clarify here that my junior Suruga Kanbaru is extremely well-mannered—at least, she’s one of the few people younger than me who treats me, someone as unworthy as me, with respect. Perhaps I ought to say the only one—and while she never resorts to openly humble or formal language with me, she always maintains a certain level of politeness when we interact, even though I outrank her only in age. Maybe it’s her straightforward personality, maybe it’s her upbringing in a basically well-off family.

To put it in simpler terms, though she sometimes speaks to me as if we’re in the same year, she isn’t the type to make her appearance with an offhanded greeting like “What up!”

I’d like you to understand that it was an exception, and well, I could understand her excitement. It was completely natural for her to be so hyped up that day, or more specifically, that night—the night of August twenty-third, as she arrived in the second-floor classroom of the now-familiar abandoned cram school, which wasn’t exactly a symbol, but at least a kind of landmark among us.

The reason being—it may not come off sounding great, but there weren’t many situations where I’d ask Kanbaru to meet me. A girl who described herself as “someone who finds meaning in life simply by being of use to you, my honorable senior Araragi,” “a part to be used by my honorable senior Araragi,” and “a disposable tool to be used by my honorable senior Araragi,” I could even understand why she leapt into the classroom after kicking down its door, giddy with joy—never mind, forget about it. Not when she refers to herself in those incomprehensible ways.

My life’s to-do list never included having my girlfriend’s junior get so attached to me…

That said, for the first thing coming out of her mouth to be that energetic and rather unsophisticated “Long time no see!” was, in the end, not wholly inappropriate.

If you were to ask me why, I’d give you the following answer: because a knee belonging to Kanbaru, confident in her ability to run, made contact with my cheek, located about five feet above the floor, since I was just standing and not sitting in a chair or anything.

It made contact.

By made contact, I mean that less in the “touched” sense and more in the “tackled” kind of way. In a soccer match, the flying knee, bearing all of her weight and speed, would have surely earned her an immediate red card. Since she’s a basketball player, maybe I should compare it to a flagrant foul resulting in instant ejection□but you don’t normally see many flying knees in basketball.

In any case, what I’m trying to say is that her greeting would’ve been appropriate if, instead of long time no see, it was long time no knee.

“Ghaah!”

Of course she injured my cheek, but that only covers the superficial issue of where she made contact, as the damage made its way to my cheekbone, inner cheek, oral cavity, cranium, and even my gray matter□it felt like the shockwave penetrating my head could even destroy the classroom wall behind me.

True, what actually cracked the classroom wall behind me was my own body, thrown into the air like a scrap of paper by the force of her flying knee.

“Ghuurk!”

I let out a second moan as my back hit the wall. I wish I could’ve let out something a little more stylish□sounding like a frog being run over by a car isn’t a very cool act.

“Not that I could hope to look cool in any situation involving me

getting kneed by my junior as soon as we meet."

"Wow, my dear senior. You really are at the top of your game. Setting up to get kneed during this time of need? You showed me up there."

Having made a beautiful landing, her mid-air balance undisturbed by her strike, Kanbaru nodded, looking at me as if I'd moved her to her core. A look of respect—it made me want to ask her what she saw in this crushed frog, and also, I hadn't set myself up to get kneed in a time of need.

What would that do for me?

"Well," Kanbaru said, "if I may speak for myself here, I'd prefer to describe it as you getting punked by my patella. The thought of my knees acting like handsome young ruffians brings me just a little bit of joy."

"Could you please not use words like 'joy' in this sort of context? And how are you sure these punks are handsome?"

"Actually, I see them more as impressionable little boys. Doesn't the world seem like a bit of a better place if little boys were living on our knees?"

"Don't describe anything as being a 'better place' in this context, either. There are no little boys living on my knees."

I stood.

As I did, I held a hand against my kicked cheek—my brain actually seemed fine, but dammit, the inside of my mouth had suffered cuts, making every retort difficult. I was tasting my blood like mad and it was like eating iron. But how could I not partake when Kanbaru was providing such a stand-up act?

"And wait," I objected, "if I should be going after you about anything, it's the fact that you kneed me, your senior, and haven't spoken an apologetic word about it."

"Apologize? Haha! What're you talking about? Am I, your faithful

junior Suruga Kanbaru, not now like a part of your body?" Putting her hands in front of her chest, she continued, "You wouldn't apologize to yourself for kneeing your own cheek, would you?"

"What eloquently awful logic!"

"Come on, you don't need to keep acting so exasperated. Listen, I understand the way my senior feels better than anyone. You're just pretending like you're worried about the damage to your cheek when what you're really concerned about is whether or not I, an athlete, hurt my knee."

"Sounds like a great senior, but whoever that is, he sure ain't me!"

It was impossible to get an apology out of her…

Was it okay to have a junior like this one?

"Sorry to let you down, Kanbaru, but the only thing I'm worried about right now is my own body."

"So in other words, my body?"

"You're making it sound more and more like I'm the disposable tool here."

"If I'm being honest, part of me thinks that I don't have to apologize for a near-miss as minor as that given how good your body is at healing itself."

"I hope you don't think that honesty can get you out of any situation!"

A frightening girl.

Had I put myself in a fairly dangerous situation by being alone in these ruins, in the middle of the night, with someone this terrifying?

Still, she'd responded to my sudden request for her presence and come running, giddy with joy. I should've been thanking her.

Especially when I considered what was to come.

What I was about to request of her.

“Yikes, you even chipped my teeth a little.”

I’d felt something like pebbles inside my mouth and spat them out, only to find fragments of my own tooth.

“Even if I’m only a mockery of one, shattering a vampire’s fang with a knee? What exactly is up with you?”

“It’s only because you’re not getting enough calcium in your daily diet.”

Kanbaru was not going to apologize.

I needed some calcium asap. Not because of anything to do with my teeth, just to hold back my anger.

“You should learn from me. I’ve never once gotten a cavity, and I can open most bottles with my teeth.”

“Don’t open bottles with your teeth.”

“But that shampoo I had to deal with the other day was a formidable foe.”

“I don’t even want to think about a situation that requires you to open a bottle of shampoo with your mouth.”

Naked in the bath and chomping on a bottle of shampoo□what kind of a cavewoman did I have for a junior?

True, a chipped tooth wasn’t an issue, it’d heal soon enough□but while I had a vampire’s powers of regeneration, a mockery is only a mockery at the end of the day.

What’s more.

As I was now□I’d been stripped of even that mockery of an ability. It did seem better to wait to introduce this fact to Kanbaru. I didn’t

want to worry her by bringing it up out of nowhere, and it was a somewhat complicated story…

I looked at her again.

She wore her grown-out hair in two tufts that reached her shoulders over her track jacket. She looked like she was in the middle of a jog, but there wasn't a drop of sweat on her, nor was her breathing belabored. She must've run all the way (with all the extra momentum leading to that knee strike), but that's a former star of the basketball team for you. It took more than a full sprint to make her tired, though you've got to wonder what it would take to tire out someone who doesn't get tired from a full sprint.

With her hair grown out, she looked a little less boyish than when I first met her, but the bandage wrapped around her left arm was still an odd note. As was the true nature of her hidden arm, ostensibly injured in an accident during practice□

"Hm? What's the matter, my dear senior? Why're you suddenly leering at my proportions?"

"I'm not."

"Huh? If you aren't, what of mine are you looking at? What do I have worth a look other than my proportions?"

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean, but stop being so modest. You're Naoetsu High's star athlete."

"I've retired."

"As someone whose life is threatened day and night by the members of your fan club, I find that hard to accept."

The posse included my own little sister (bigger one). Your own flesh and blood being after your life is a truly gloomy thing.

"Heheh. No need to leer at me. Don't you worry when it comes to me."

"? Worry? ? Who said I was worried about you?"

“Oh, stop playing stupid. Minding the details like always. But have a little more faith in your juniors,” Kanbaru chided me. “It’s okay, I made sure to take off my bra.”

“Goddammit, I am worried about you!”

It really hurt to make this retort since my shattered tooth, sharp despite my temporarily broken link with Shinobu, cut up the inside of my mouth and made me spit blood.

The fact that she was wearing a track jacket, though, gave me quiet relief. At least she hadn’t mistaken this for some kind of tryst…

“It might be hard to see because it’s made of regrettably thick material, but I, Suruga Kanbaru, cannot lie to her senior. From my waist up, my bare skin is currently in contact with my jacket.”

“What about your waist down? You’re making me worry.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t mind unzipping right now. I, Suruga Kanbaru, have nothing to hide.”

“You keep on saying ‘I, Suruga Kanbaru’ like you’re so proud of yourself today, but personally, I think you ought to stay anonymous until you learn what it means to have discretion.”

“I know what it means to have discretion. Who do you take me for?”

“I wonder if you even know what it means to have a sense of shame.”

“What’s the matter? You seem so dissatisfied. Oh, wait. Are you in the camp of people who like to undo a girl’s bra themselves?”

“Camp? This isn’t some kind of ideological war.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is. How ironic. By taking off my bra, I took myself off your list of potential romantic partners.”

“I’d say you’ve taken yourself off the path of all that is right.”

A line that might sound pretty cool on its own.

But I was just scolding my bra-less junior.

“What? But why else would you want to meet me at a place like this, at this hour?”

“‘Why else’? What kind of why are you thinking about?”

“You finally feel ready to accept my chastity, right?”

“Right no!”

My calcium deficiency was starting to affect my ability to form sentences.

And that’s why she got so excited that she kneed me in my cheek?

“I know this is your first appearance in a while, Kanbaru, but aren’t you acting a little too excited?”

“Maybe I am. I never imagined I’d have to go this long without taking the stage. I was starting to worry that I’d done something wrong.”

“Well, it’d be hard to say that you haven’t…”

Not when her every word was so dangerous.

In a way, she was a far more dangerous character than Shinobu.

“The rules of basketball kept on changing while I was waiting my turn. Not just the rules, in fact, they changed the entire court. Even I was shocked by that one.”

“And what about me? We’ve been wasting so much time that the entire college admissions process is gonna change before I graduate…”

Oops. A little too meta?

Let’s get back on track.

“Anyway, I don’t intend on taking your chastity.”

“Aw, that sucks.”

“Is that really going to be your reaction? Do you really have to put it that way?”

“Even so. You invited a young lady, which is to say a girl, here. An abandoned location. In the middle of the night. All on her own. With a suggestive text message. At that moment, I think, you forfeited the right to act surprised, about being taken that way.”

“Agh…”

What could I possibly say to that?

All of those commas and short sentences?

Whether or not my message was suggestive, as someone with a girlfriend to whom I’ve promised my future, I guess I should’ve done everything I could to avoid such a misunderstanding. In fact, making biweekly visits to the garbage dump known as Kanbaru’s to clean it up was also kind of an issue.

Even if this meeting was mandated by a promise□

“Also, I was going so fast just now that I ended up in a classroom on the third floor and not the second, and there was a bed up there made out of desks. Isn’t that something that you put together?”

“What? I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about… A bed?”

What was going on?

Had someone decided to live here unbeknownst to me?

“Look at you, playing stupid yet again.”

“‘Yet again’? I’m not really the type to play stupid, you know…”

“I think you could say that we’re common-law married at this point? It’d be fine for you to go ahead and take my chastity, right?”

“Right no… Sheesh.”

Common-law married?

Nothing about this girl was common or lawful.

“But listen, Kanbaru. If I’m being serious, the bond that’s our friendship goes beyond the walls of junior and senior, or of man and woman.” Some people may laugh at the thought of a friendship between a man and a woman, but I did feel this way.

“Hm. I’m most honored and grateful to hear that. And, my senior, I completely agree with just about all of it.”

“Just about?”

“I think what I’m feeling, for my part, is lust.”

“Then we’re talking about two entirely different things!”

“A lust that goes beyond the walls of man and woman. In other words, I’d be just as filled as lust for you even if I was a boy. There’s not a day that goes by when I don’t think that it’s fate.”

“Could you please chill out? For just one day out of the year?”

Good thing she’s a girl, in that case.

Seriously.

“All right,” Kanbaru said, “it’s been a while since I’ve gotten all riled up with you. I’m starting to feel hot, would it be okay if I took off my jacket?”

“Sure, just hang it somewhere around th□wait, no, it’s not! You’re not wearing anything underneath that jacket, right?!”

“Tch. You figured it out.”

“Did you just click your tongue at me? Your senior?!”

“No, but I did use it to lick my lips.”

“That’s even scarier.”

“Or maybe I smacked my lips.”

“Are you thinking about eating me or something? Anyway, keep your jacket on. Um…so let’s get to the reason I asked you to come here,” I got to the point at last.

It almost felt a little too late. I’d have loved to go on joking around with Kanbaru all night□but no, that wouldn’t do.

“Hm. There’s something you wanted to ask me?”

“Yup, there is.”

“I’d convinced myself that it had to do with my chastity, but it seems I jumped to conclusions.”

“That conclusion is so far removed from reality that even you couldn’t get there with a jump. There’s never going to be a day when I’d ask you that.”

For the record, the message I sent Kanbaru that morning read as follows:

“come to second floor classroom tonight at 9 alone i need to ask you something”□I’d like to think of its somewhat poor composition as part of its charm.

You have to consider the situation I was in when I sent it, too.

“What I wanted to ask you…was basically to help me out with something, if you’re willing,” I said, switching to a more serious demeanor. “But if I’m being upfront with you, I’d like you to turn me down□”

“I’d never say no to you!” exclaimed Kanbaru.

I’d thought she might. Anyone could predict her reply.

“How could I, Suruga Kanbaru, ever refuse to meet the demands of my senior Araragi? You could ask me to move heaven and earth,

and I'd do it!"

"Okay…" She was looking at me with a glare that could move heaven and earth all on its own, and I was flustered. "Well, it's not exactly my demand, I'm just an intermediary—what's more, I can't really give you many details about this thing I want you to help with…"

"You don't know the details?"

"Yeah. I don't know anything."

My ignorance was probably by design—if I knew more, I might veto it before the request traveled any further, but I didn't know and couldn't dismiss it out of hand on Kanbaru's behalf.

I had to leave it up to her.

I had to, given the nature of the request, too.

"So," I continued, "if you say no, that's all there is to it, which is why that's preferable—but if you insist on helping, I'll do everything I can to make sure no harm comes to you."

"Hah! Harm coming to me? There's no need for you to worry. If you just have to worry, then go ahead and focus on one part of my body, namely my chest area."

"I'm not going ahead."

The world doesn't need a guy who thinks only about the boobs of his juniors. And how would he, anyway? Like, hmm, she's not wearing a bra today…or something? Not that I knew if the no bra thing was a joke—we'd moved on to the matter at hand before I could ever find out.

Eight or nine out of ten, it was a joke, but Kanbaru just might do something like that, which is why I was so worried, and also why I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

No, I'm not saying that I couldn't take my eyes off her boobs.

“If anything, I, Suruga Kanbaru, would feel sad to see you worrying yourself over me. To be specific, about as sad as you’d feel when your favorite musician’s best-of album doesn’t include your favorite song of theirs.”

“That really is specific.”

“Where you end up thinking, ‘Oh, so this artist doesn’t consider that song as one of their best…’”

Kanbaru’s shoulders slumped.

It sounded like a recent real-life occurrence, given her reaction.

But Suruga Kanbaru, with her brisk temperament, soon seemed to get over it. She looked back up and said, “Well, I guess I should just think of it as me noticing the greatness in them that they didn’t notice themselves.”

What a positive person. Positively reckless.

“And so, I’m happy that you’re willing to rely on me, given how reserved you can be with me. Don’t hold yourself back…sorry, don’t hold anything back from me.”

“You at least corrected yourself, but I dunno…”

That said, she just might have figured out what I was going to say.

Hanekawa and Senjogahara were one thing, but I wouldn’t have asked Kanbaru like this unless it was serious. Even she knew that.

Right. Just like the time we visited that rundown shrine.

“If that’s what you wanted to know, I think you already have the answer: I came running here in spite of everything.”

“Yeah□well, I guess so.”

“I just can’t stop wanting to serve you. I came all the way here even though I had a book I wanted to read tonight.”

“…”

Suddenly she was just trying to guilt-trip me.

For all her good manners, she really was rude.

A book she wanted to read?

That was my competition, as her senior? Some book?

“You say that, but books embody human knowledge. No matter how great you are, it’s awfully presumptuous of you to think that you’re a match for human history.”

“No, Kanbaru, I’m not that presumptuous, but can’t your book wait? You don’t have to read it tonight, do you?”

“I could come running to you any time I want, too. Didn’t have to be tonight.”

You’re playing by the same rules, she said.

For someone who wanted to serve me, she was coming off as awfully self-serving.

“And anyway, I bet this book you want to read is one of your boys’ love novels, right?”

“What’s this now? I don’t get to see this every day. One of your predictions missing its mark? Of all the times for your read to be off, it was about a book?”

“Stop trying so hard to sound clever. So, you read other kinds of books?”

“Of course. A wide variety of them.”

Really? Honestly, this surprised me. BL was all I ever dug up when I cleaned her room□but then, she did count Senjogahara as her senior and mentor. Maybe, having learned from that indiscriminate reader, it wasn’t so surprising that Kanbaru read widely.

“That’s how it is now that I’ve retired from the basketball team. I’m working hard every single day and night to broaden my horizons as a person.”

“Wow, Kanbaru. I underestimated you.”

“That’s why I’ve been growing out my hair, too. Think of it as my effort to broaden my options for kinky stuff. Brings a tear to your eye, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does.”

As her senior, it was enough to make me want to cry.

Still, I absolutely needed to know what kind of books she consumed. I decided to ask her more about her reading habits.

“In that case, Kanbaru. What exactly were you planning on reading tonight?”

“What else? A little something by the great Shugoro Yamamoto.”

What else? I could have come up with a lot of things, but not that. A literary eminence from the last century? Even I, someone who doesn’t read many books, knew the name. I had to admit, I’d underestimated Kanbaru. The likes of me couldn’t hope to compete with the works of Shugoro Yamamoto.

But I didn’t feel particularly frustrated or powerless. If anything, I was glad that she was reading regular and proper books. It looked like I could play the part of a pretty respectable senior.

“Out of curiosity, what by Shugoro Yamamoto? If you think something’s worth reading, I’d like to check it out too.”

“Huh? Well, I have plenty of BL novels I could recommend, in that case.”

“Could we please start off with some Yamamoto?”

“I see. Then,” Kanbaru told me the title of the book, “it’s called Beautiful Girls Take the Lead.”

“Liar!” I screamed. “The great Shugoro Yamamoto writing a book with a title like that?!”

“Hm? He really did, so what am I supposed to say… Though it’s out of print and unavailable in stores lately.”

“…”

Apparently, it wasn’t a lie. My straight-man instincts had gotten the better of me…

Now that I thought about it, didn’t Yamamoto turn down a prestigious prize for a book called Lives of Great Japanese Women or something? Was Beautiful Girls a variation on that?

“It’s a collection of short stories that ran in Shojo Club. Y’hear me? Shojo Club.”

“You’re almost making it sound like an underground work that ran in an underground magazine, but I bet it’s just YA? Something you’d call a light novel these days?”

“Well, light novels these days are a lot like erotica!”

“Please don’t say erotica.”

I didn’t know what else by Yamamoto she’d read, but she must’ve chosen Beautiful Girls Take the Lead because of its title.

In fact, she must’ve bought it by accident.

“By the way, I only feel comfortable saying this now that it’s established,” prefaced Kanbaru, “but something about abbreviating light novels as LN’s feels wrong to me. The same way people from San Francisco don’t like it when you call it San Fran.”

“Say something before it’s established, not afterwards.”

“I don’t want to cause any kind of controversy.”

“You don’t? But yeah, I see what you mean… How should we abbreviate them, then? Novels? That’d be confusing…” Speaking of

novels, it seems that some fans of literary fiction don't like having it called lit-fic□and of course, some people don't even like the term light novel to begin with.

"A certain nationally beloved anime series might not have become as popular if it had been called San-Fran!"

"Sakuragaoka High School isn't even in San Francisco, that'd be why. But going back to these girls who take the lead, is it in the sense of, say, leading an army into battle on horseback?"

"Probably. But according to Sigmund Freud, horses are a sexual motif."

"Most things are, according to Freud."

I retract my earlier statement.

Kanbaru needed to give me back that gladness I felt for her.

"Apologize. To Shugoro Yamamoto, for reading his work for impure reasons."

"I know I show you a lot of respect, but I don't want you bossing me around when it comes to how I read. A work belongs to its readers as soon as it's released. Shouldn't we respect individual readers' freedom to have whatever feelings and intentions they want toward a novel?"

"Oh, now you're going to take the moral high ground?"

"If anything, introducing the work in a fun and familiar way might encourage younger readers like you, who probably think of Shugoro Yamamoto as a hard-to-approach writer of dry novels, an author that a literary award has been named after, to try picking him up for a change. That's right, Shugoro Yamamoto's Beautiful Girls Take the Lead."

"You're not wrong, I suppose…"

As someone who's read none of the man's work, I'm far from qualified to tell you whether you ought to start with Beautiful Girls

Take the Lead, but readers are free to make that choice as well. Some people must even find joy in starting a series with its final volume though reading a detective novel from its solution first does strike me as a little too free.

“It might cause his sales to spike,” Kanbaru argued. “It might result in a new appreciation for Beautiful Girls Take the Lead.”

“Aren’t little-known books little known for a reason? Isn’t that why it’s out of print and unavailable in stores?”

“Hah. Now that more books are being digitized, we’re entering an era where ‘out of print’ won’t mean much. We’ll prize precisely those books that go out of print. That’s right, I’m Naoetsu High’s very own Biblia Antique Books.”

“I imagine that minors wouldn’t be allowed in.” And any book that features her as the protagonist should have the blurb, Unread by the greats! Never discussed in other works of fiction!

“Hmph. If we’re going down that path, I could come up with plenty of variations. Like, Ignored by the Japan Bookstore Awards! A volume that even a bookseller could never recommend!”

“Actually, I’d like to read that one…”

“How about The gentle horror novel that never sent a single chill down a spine is here at last! or The bizarre work that no one ever discussed online! or The controversial tear-jerker that brought none of its readers to tears, now in paperback!”

“There are a lot of ways to spin negatives…but people aren’t going to overlook all your flaws just because you call yourself controversial. Why do a paperback of a controversial tear-jerker that brought none of its readers to tears? Where’s the demand?”

“You know how it is. You want to hold on to the co-op deal you got for the New In Paperback table…”

“Stop carrying water for publishers.”

“Still. Kanbaru Biblia Antique Books, or Cambrian Antique Books

for short, has an impressive selection of products. It's full of titles that might run afoul of future laws."

"Then minors aren't allowed in, after all. The Book Burners are going to torch your place."

"You never know, I might get to be in a roundtable with Miss Shioriko and Miss Yomiko."

"A bookseller and a booklover with book puns as names. Why would you be alongside them?"

"For everything else. Who's going to take care of the remainders?"

"I think I get it now, but…please, don't say those kinds of things around me."

"Fine, then why don't you start your own bookstore? Koyomi Academy's very own Biblia Antique Books."

"Hey, I'm just as much of a Naoetsu High student as you! Why do I need to transfer schools to open a used bookstore?! I have to go that far to avoid any competition?!"

Wait, where was that from, though? Koyomi Academy? It felt like I'd heard it before.

"Oh, right. The school from Happy Lesson."

"Bullseye. I'm impressed you were so quick to remember. There's my dear senior."

"Don't test your seniors. Why am I taking an anime and manga pop quiz? What kind of Magic Academy have I found myself enrolled in? Also, we already made a reference to Happy Lesson once."

"We can talk about it as many times as we want. I lost my mother, right? No wonder I'm attracted to a story about five teachers barging into a student's home to become his moms."

"Kanbaru…" Catching a bittersweet expression on the face of my ever-bold junior, I felt a brief tug at my heartstrings□hold on, no.

You can't bring up something as emotional as your mother's demise in the middle of inane banter.

"By the way, of his five moms, my favorite is Miss Uzuki Shitenno. What do you think, senpai?"

"You'd move this conversation forward? Miss Shitenno looks the least motherly of them all."

"Don't I get to have some input about what seems motherly to me?"

"As if you ever consider anyone else's."

"Hm? What's the matter, don't tell me you're a fan of Miss Fumitsuki Nanakorobi."

"She's not one of the mommy-teachers."

Setting traps, eh?

"Anyway, this is how you do it," my junior declared. "Keep up this kind of grassroots activism, and we'll get to see a Blu-ray box set go on sale one day. Heheheh, Kanbaru Biblia Antique Books is going to have that one right on its new video releases shelf."

"Just to make sure, you know we don't have that kind of influence?"

Uh, what were we discussing again? We'd been chatting about beautiful young fictional men and women for long enough…

Oh, right.

Kanbaru had refused to turn down my request, as I'd feared□fine, then. I'd just have to prepare myself for what was to come.

And anyway.

When I thought about it, I had no right to put a stop on this□and even less of an ability to do so. Were I to avoid Kanbaru, I knew what she would do.

She would undoubtedly contact my junior through some other route—in which case, I felt better about that contact happening in a place where I could see it.

What I might or might not be able to do was a different question altogether. Just because you can see something happening doesn't mean you can reach out and get involved in it…

"Okay, Kanbaru. So about this request—sorry to be this abrupt about it, but could you follow me?"

"Hm? Oh, there's nothing for us to do here?"

"Yeah, I only used it as a meeting place."

"Huh… Then why not just meet at one of our homes?"

Her vague doubt, now that she mentioned it, was on the mark. Wait, why did I choose this abandoned cram school as our meeting place again?

I wanted to say there was something…

"Well, it doesn't matter," Kanbaru said. "I won't sweat the details—I'll go anywhere. Don't worry, I composed my will and testament."

"That's a little scary?!"

Yikes, her grandparents might find what surely read like a suicide note!

"A will and testament written up by a minor?"

"It starts, By the time you read this letter, I doubt I am still of this world."

"Very romantic, but…"

How uncool she'd look when they found out she was still of this world.

“Kanbaru, there’s no need for you to act that way. We’re just going to another meeting spot. A rendezvous, I guess there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Really, now. I can’t believe you sometimes. So, how’d you talk me up to get her interested? My grades? My connections? How popular I am?”

“Rendezvous as in meet, not as in date. She said she wanted an introduction to you, so…”

“Hmm. Fine. If that’s what you say, it’s as good as gold.”

“I wish you’d trust me only half as much as you do…but it’ll be okay.” I was trying to soothe her nerves with empty words. “At least, this isn’t me playing matchmaker or middleman for some boy or girl who’s interested in confessing to you.”

“I wouldn’t mind an introduction like that, though. I’d just turn them down.”

“…”

She took after her esteemed senior Senjogahara when it came to how unconcerned she was about that sort of thing.

How she didn’t treat everyone the way she treated me put me against the wall in its own way.

I’d have almost preferred to introduce Kanbaru to some boy or girl over having to introduce her to someone like her. I could use some empty words myself.

“Of course,” Kanbaru said, “it’d be different if the punch line ends up being: And the person I want to introduce you to…is me!”

“Stop trying to sneak your way into a romantic relationship with me. Just how much of a man-eater are you?”

“Oh, I don’t want a romantic relationship. Just a physical one. As a man-eater, I merely seek prey.”

“You’re sending a shiver down my spine.”

“I don’t believe in emotional connections.”

“Who hurt you… Geez, what even goes through your mind as you live life?”

“I think you ought to go to a hospital to get yourself checked out if you think that anything goes through my mind,” Kanbaru answered with a smile.

A stylish line, but little more. Doesn’t work unless the right person says it…

“Let’s get back on track,” she urged.

I was glad she realized we’d gotten off of it.

“Okie dokie, my senior Araragi. I get what’s going on now. So let’s get going, it’s time for me to meet this person I don’t know in a location I don’t know!”

“You really are incredible, you know that?”

Just so bold. So bold that maybe she could stand toe-to-toe with her, a person I was only ever overwhelmed by.

“And away we go!”

Then□

Right as Kanbaru used her bandaged left arm to pump her fist, it happened.

003

Bam.

Bam, bam.

Bam, bam, bam—I heard a knocking at the door.

A knocking at the door of the classroom we were using as a meeting spot—a, well, standard sliding double door that creaked the way you'd expect an abandoned building's door to when you opened or closed it.

It seemed that Kanbaru had conscientiously locked it behind her upon entering—giving you a glimpse into her good upbringing, but then, after so properly closing the classroom door, she'd proceeded to land a tooth-shattering flying knee on my face. But I could grill her, or rather rebuke her about this, later.

Bam.

Bam, bam.

Bam, bam, bam.

The sound of knocking at the door, but not a violent one. Polite, if anything—a quiet, regular knock. But hearing such propriety, I couldn't help but feel like something was wrong.

Of course I did. A gentleman can be as proper and dignified as he wants, but it only makes him seem creepier if you're meeting him deep in a dark forest—likewise the polite knock I now heard in an abandoned building in the middle of the night.

It was more than enough to make me nervous.

"Huh? What's this, a visitor? Come in," Kanbaru said.

…She wasn't nervous at all.

A heart of iron, despite only being a second-year high school student. You could tell she used to compete at the national level.

"Hm? My senior Araragi, isn't it this acquaintance of yours? You invited someone other than me here?"

"No, you're the only one□"

A visitor?

What, did she get impatient because Kanbaru and I were spending more time than I expected enjoying our pointless banter? Had she sent someone for us? Was that it?

The thought crossed my mind, but it seemed impossible.

It wasn't as if I'd spent that much time talking to Kanbaru, after all□yes, we'd rambled, but mostly in terms of topic, not length□and even if we'd rambled on for a long time, I couldn't imagine her ever getting impatient.

Her perception of the world involved spans of time different from mine□so then, who was it? Who now visited this classroom?

My foolish self got excited at the off-chance that maybe it was Shinobu. My link to her was down after having been severed, but maybe she'd used some other method to track me down?

That of course wasn't the case□but I'd later learn that while my notion missed the mark, it wasn't by far, in more ways than one.

In any case.

With Kanbaru's permission, the creaking door opened and into the classroom entered□toward us entered a suit of armor.

"…!"

Armor?

Nope, armor—undoubtedly armor.

Armor is the right word.

But was it right for this armor to have appeared?

What exactly was the context—what exactly transpired for an armored warrior to appear? Just moments ago, Kanbaru and I were enjoying a nice little conversation—so why?

My mind, according to its standard and proper routines, began to process this armored warrior who had suddenly appeared. Is this some sort of anachronistic cosplay? My thoughts started to lumber forward with optimistic, almost tortoise-like steps—but meanwhile those of the famously swift and agile Suruga Kanbaru were as quick as a hare's.

No.

To be more accurate, I doubt she thought at all—Suruga Kanbaru started to move the moment the door opened and the armored warrior came clanging in.

She held high her bandaged left arm.

And leapt toward the armor.

"K-Kanbaru!"

"Get down!" she yelled, even taking my safety into account—and slammed her left fist into the armor's torso, at the center of its trunk.

Though technically speaking, the left fist wasn't hers.

It was an aberration's.

And so while a normal bare fist would be liable to break if you used it to punch a suit of armor, it was the armor that broke in this case—one straight punch from Kanbaru was all it took to reduce it to pieces.

All in the blink of an eye.

It did seem a bit extreme to punch it, no questions asked, before we knew what the hell it was, but the sheer speed of Kanbaru's reaction to a suspicious figure was praiseworthy.

Lacking the courage to slug an armored warrior in any situation at all, I could only follow her request (order?) and reflexively lie down (my hands behind my head without a second thought, like some civilian surrendering to an army). It was then that I witnessed something even more shocking than her decision-making abilities.

The scattered armor.

I assumed the person wearing it would be exposed, their identity clear, no matter who they may be.

But that didn't happen.

Inside the armor was nothing.

"…"

This was enough to put even Kanbaru at a loss for words she silently stepped backwards until she reached me. You could say she ran backwards. Super-fast. Honestly, when it comes to her physical abilities, what deserves special note isn't so much the destructive power of her aberrational left fist but everything about her from the waist down that she tempered and trained through her own stubborn, steadfast will.

"Hold on a second," she objected. "Could you please not focus on everything about me from the waist down at a time like this? At least consider reading the room here."

"Well, then stop reading my mind. I specifically said everything you trained, meaning your legs. What else would I be talking about?"

I rose from my defensive state as I bickered with her my eyes never leaving the scattered armor, of course.

A full set of armor.

Kanbaru's strike had sent it flying into pieces—but when I looked closely, none of the parts were damaged or broken. Like a set of toy blocks that had fallen over. The armor had gone flying a little too easily, no matter how powerful Kanbaru's strike, but it made perfect sense if the suit was empty.

"I'd say it was more like a shell," Kanbaru remarked. "It was strange how little of an impact I felt. I nearly thought I'd missed—what is that thing? Your friend?"

"I don't have any friends who are armor."

"I wonder, what kind of friends do you have?"

"…"

I couldn't answer her in a timely manner.

I just didn't have many friends she didn't know already.

In any case, I didn't know any walking sets of armor that were empty too—as a friend or otherwise.

I didn't know.

Even any aberration.

"So, at the very least, this armored warrior isn't the person you wanted to introduce to me."

"Wait…you punched it when you weren't sure?"

What was she planning on doing if it really was cosplay or someone's idea of a surprise?

"What was I planning? Well, I'd apologize. I simply did what I had to do at the moment to provide you the protection you deserve."

"…"

What a scary junior. She was never rattled.

Still, her powers of judgment and combat were equally reliable—I

didn't know what she wanted from Kanbaru, but with my link to Shinobu severed, I certainly wasn't the more useful teen of us two.

In any case, whatever aberration or frightful apparition this was, Kanbaru had settled things before they could even get started□okay, scattered more than settled.

She really sucked at keeping a room tidy.

Was this related to her request? Did I need to let her know about this?

"Hm?" Kanbaru tilted her head. "Let's see…what do we have here."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, I thought it was a full set of armor, but upon closer inspection, it's missing something."

"It is?"

"Yeah. We've got a few suits of armor at my home□compared to them, this guy is short a vital piece."

"…"

A few suits of armor? What kind of a home was that?

Well, it was a grand Japanese-style estate… A few might be an exaggeration, but it wouldn't be surprising if she were familiar with at least one set.

"I didn't notice anything myself, Kanbaru□hmm, okay. If you know so much about suits of armor, could you put it back together?"

"What? Me?" She pointed at her own confused face.

Despite all the business about pledging her loyalty to me, Kanbaru wasn't used to being put to work for the most part. Not a useful teen at all in that sense, she was a diva.

I said, "It's not like I know how a suit of armor fits together."

“Then I’ll give you instructions. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

“You don’t even think twice about putting your dear senior to work, do you? But fine. I’ll show you I’m a man, capable of more than lying prone and taking cover when he’s told to. I’m just as capable of being supine.”

“If there’s anything I don’t want to see, it’s a senior I respect demonstrating that ability in public… But why put this thing back together anyway?”

“Well, if we did, it just might start moving again…”

We needed to get ourselves over to our next meeting spot once we’d convened without incident. As things stood, though, our meet-up was hardly “without incident.” To be frank, I didn’t want any additional trouble and considered pretending that none of this stuff with the armor ever happened, and walking off□but I was fresh off a first-hand experience of what happens when you walk away from seeds of trouble and allow them to sprout.

I lacked any sort of knowledge or wisdom about our situation but still needed to do everything I could. It couldn’t take that much time to build this suit of armor back up if Kanbaru knew how it fit together.

“No, I think it’s gonna take a while… Don’t you know how heavy a suit of armor is? This isn’t like putting together a toy model or something.”

“Ah… Not that I’ve ever assembled a toy model.”

“Hm, really? I’m surprised to hear that from you, given your many interests.”

“Don’t laud my many interests just to keep on chatting. It’s not like I never touched one, I just never completed one.”

“Oh, I get you. I buy model kits all the time, but never take them out of the box.”

“Okay, in that case, don’t lump me in with your ilk.”

And so on.

If anything was a waste of time, it was these kinds of conversations—but as a result, I was spared the onerous task of reassembling the scattered armor (in accordance with my junior's instructions). Not because she did it herself—our diva never labors.

It moved.

Without us laying a finger on it—in fact, without us even approaching it. Each of the scattered pieces began moving on its own nonetheless.

Like a video being played in reverse.

Moving on its own—it put itself back together.

As if the empty armor had been a lifeform—it creaked and clanged itself back into consciousness.

Forming itself back into life—like a lifeform.

The helmet, the chestplate, the robes, the gauntlets, the greaves, the mask, the shoulder guards, the socks, the straw sandals, and the riding shoes came together—completing the armored warrior we had seen.

In that abandoned building with no electricity, lit only by the moon and stars, I hadn't gotten a good look at the armored warrior earlier—but now that I had another chance.

Now that I saw it again, I realized just how loud and flashy it was.

Bright red armor.

What was this kind of armor called again—akazonae?

No, the color almost seemed to go beyond red, as if it was blood—I could only watch dumbfounded at something so unbelievable, but I did notice one new thing.

A new discovery, or rather, I understood Kanbaru's remark—that it

was missing something. Now that I could view its full figure, the missing piece was clear.

What the armor lacked.

Putting aside that there was nothing inside it, of course, what the otherwise full set of equipment lacked was□

"…■■■■"

Huh?

It spoke?

The empty suit of armor□the shell□devoid of any contents?

No way, impossible. Some breeze must have passed through the hollow suit. It sounded far too muffled to be any kind of voice… at…

"Get back!"

all□once again Kanbaru moved faster than my synapses could fire. Nimbly. She brandished her left arm anew□then entered the armor's space without a moment's hesitation and smashed it square in the middle.

An empty set of armor not only moving but automatically putting itself back together was shocking to say the least, but Kanbaru reacted to the anomaly at a speed that sent a shiver down my spine. I did as she bade and got back.

It was a great mystery why she stayed so devoted to a senior like me (in my defense, I didn't back up because I was scared of the armor, my body just obeyed Kanbaru without any mental input□maybe that's even more pathetic?); whatever the reason, she had the kind of unhesitating personality that stepped on the gas in the face of danger.

But.

This time□the armor didn't come crashing apart.

Rather than scattering—it staggered back, unable to absorb the entire impact, but stood in place.

No.

It didn't just stand in place—it lurched back and used its left arm, its empty left arm, to try to grab Kanbaru.

Its movements sluggish.

It tried to grab Kanbaru's head from above—she's by no means a short girl, but the armored warrior was easily a foot and a half taller than her. Not having balked at their height difference in the first place, she of course didn't cower when that left arm reached out in reaction.

She avoided it by a hair's width—and slipped past to deal another blow, as if to counter, aiming not at its torso this time but at its chin. Not an uppercut—a laser-straight punch from below.

Naturally, it wasn't clear if aiming at what would normally be a weak spot meant anything up against an empty suit of armor—but Suruga Kanbaru's movements, far more familiar with brawling than mine, were enough to make me swear: Crap, I need to make sure I never piss her off. She's got my unconditional obedience as her senior.

Why was an athlete like her so comfortable in a brawl? Maybe you couldn't make it to the top in jock-land without being at least a little tough…

I'd fought her in this very classroom after she'd been poisoned by an aberration, and come to think of it, her movements then were pretty skillful too.

I doubted they were at the level of the Fire Sisters' designated brawn, but simply having full control over her body impressed my still-stunned self to no end.

This was no time to be impressed, though.

I think that goes without saying.

The armor's movements were dull, while Kanbaru's were swift, and not even relatively. While one blow might not have been enough to scatter the armor again, I wondered if it'd break after two or three.

The armor's missing equipment also encouraged this thought—but that isn't what happened.

Though Kanbaru dodged its grabbing arm, even a punch to the jaw did nothing but shake the warrior's helmet. She tried to hit it with a third shot—but suddenly fell to her knees.

She slumped over.

And collapsed.

"?! Kanbaru?!"

"S-Stay back!"

I could tell from her voice that she felt just as perplexed, but that's what she said. Pinning me in place with those words, she rose from her position on the floor, on one knee, before charging at the armored warrior's legs like a runner from a crouch start.

This wasn't a body-press, it was a tackle.

The armor wouldn't fall to punches, so now she tried to take it down by brute force—indeed, even if she couldn't send it flying into pieces, its own weight could scatter it if she smashed it against the floor. That must've been her goal, but even a rocket-propelled double-leg takedown, powered by Kanbaru's muscles, ended in failure.

"…!"

This time—it didn't waver one inch.

It didn't sway, nor even shake.

It didn't need to adjust its footing—the armored warrior withstood the tackle and merely stood at attention as if roots had grown from its feet.

What? It almost felt like…

The thing was getting tougher and tougher.

One strike broke it apart at first□then it only staggered□then it was only shaken□and then it didn't budge an inch? The progression was far too quick to be explained away as the armored warrior acclimating to Kanbaru's attacks. That seemed, if anything, untenable given its dull movements.

Yet, just ten or so minutes after its appearance□the armored warrior had clearly grown stronger.

I'd grasped one side of what was going on, but only the one. At that point, I should've been paying attention to the other.

"A□" voiced Kanbaru.

Still clinging and pushing into the armor following her double-leg takedown.

"Araragi-senpai□" she said, clinging on tight.

No.

Even her gripping arms now fell in vain□it was Kanbaru, not the warrior, who collapsed despite it having done nothing to her.

"□Run."

It was the one order I couldn't obey.

004

The armored warrior grew tougher and tougher—but I hadn't noticed how Kanbaru was growing weaker and weaker in contrast.

She started by delivering a blow to its body.

Then another blow—she was on one knee when she punched its chin. I found it strange that she'd buckled then, but when I saw her collapse right after grasping onto it with her tackle, I knew.

I noticed at last, all but too late. I should have sooner, or rather, it's strange that I didn't. I'd witnessed the phenomenon time and again, and experienced it as often.

An energy drain.

The ability to suck away a target's strength, vitality, and will through sheer proximity or by touch—an aberrational phenomenon that we were very familiar with.

In other words, there were two sides to it.

The armored warrior grew tougher and tougher, Kanbaru weaker and weaker—her sleek movements and judgment had worked against her.

She'd gotten far too close and touched it far too much before she could notice; had I been in her shoes, it couldn't have drained more than one attack's worth of energy.

No, maybe it was inevitable—try as we might, neither of us would have connected an armored warrior to energy drain. Whether it was me or Kanbaru, we wouldn't have figured it out for sure until we collapsed.

Why?

Why would an old-fashioned, anachronistic armored warrior use an energy drain like it was some sort of vampire?

What was going on here?

What was this thing?

There was no time for thinking, though realizing that the armored warrior could drain energy didn't change what I had to do. I had to retrieve Kanbaru, collapsed at the feet she'd charged into that was all.

I didn't know the precise type of energy drain the armor used, or the specific conditions needed to activate it, but couldn't concern myself with that.

Unlike Kanbaru, who had an aberration within her left hand, I wasn't even a mockery of a vampire now that my link to Shinobu had been severed. I could very well collapse in a humiliatingly instantaneous moment if I were hit by a powerful energy drain.

I could very well be sucked dry, but I'd use that moment for the sake of Suruga Kanbaru, who'd summoned her last bit of strength to squeeze out her final order to run.

I still didn't know why the armored warrior was here, why it had appeared, or anything about its identity but she had come here for one reason alone. I'd asked her to.

She'd gotten caught up in this because of me and no one else.

If the worst were to happen to her, I'd never be able to look Senjogahara in the eye for the rest of my life and so I charged at the armored warrior.

I wouldn't say I had any, but if I had to pick one, the idea was to dash past its legs and gallantly scoop up the fallen Kanbaru over the course of the next three seconds. For the most part, though, my life hasn't gone the way I imagine.

As all of you know very well.

My maneuver wasn't all for naught—because the armored warrior, with Kanbaru right under its eyes, reacted. Not that it had any eyes at all in its helm—but I felt as though it glared at me.

Then it moved, too—seemingly having absorbed Kanbaru's energy, it attempted a tackle like she'd done, oddly enough.

Imagine an armored warrior that feels about twice your size tackling you head-on. It looked to be going for a double-leg takedown by the way it moved, but naturally there was our significant height difference.

What was essentially a shoulder tackle smashed into my abdomen, and the impact made me wonder if my internal organs had all been torn apart. It wouldn't have been surprising—who could find fault with this story's punch line being me, deprived of vampiric regeneration, dying on the spot?

But maybe my lack of any half-hearted power was a blessing—because even a merciless fist that breaks ten bricks is surprisingly ineffective at piercing a thin scrap of silk floating in the air. In other words, I flew backwards, utterly unable to stand my ground.

I rolled along the floor, making a mess of the room's desks and chairs and forming new bruises across my body, yet I wasn't torn in half like I repeatedly have been.

I could've been the one left scattered across the room this time—but damn, had I gotten used to my vampiric immortality at some point? The dull pain in every inch of my body, and the blood oozing from all my scrapes, finally made me feel human.

How selfish of me. After spending all that time during spring break desperately wanting to turn back into a human, I desired those vampiric powers.

To protect Kanbaru—I told myself. I couldn't even stand up. I'd get to Kanbaru even if it meant crawling my way to her, but to cut to the chase, there was no need. My pointless struggle truly had no point.

I say this because the armored warrior ignored Kanbaru's collapsed form and began walking toward me—step by step.

While its pace hadn't changed, it didn't seem as sluggish as before—its walk almost seemed nimble, in spite of the heavy armor.

Had it absorbed my energy too when we collided? Nope, now that I was human, my juice wouldn't even whet its appetite—I couldn't believe it. In my own amateurish way, I'd faced off against a number of aberrations in quick succession, but never had I confronted one that got stronger the more it fought.

It got stronger the more it fought?

That basically made it my natural predator.

"■■■■□"

The armor seemed to mutter something else—but before I could decipher the sounds, only a step and a half separated us.

I thought it might continue on and just trample me.

It probably could, as if I were an ant—but instead, the armored warrior bent over slightly and grabbed me by the collar, as if to help me as I struggled to get up, and lifted me up like a tablecloth it was getting ready to put away.

It lifted me up—then looked straight at me.

Again, not that the armored warrior had any eyes—

"Wh…"

My words were halting.

The blows across my body as I rolled through the classroom—and the more direct damage to my abdomen—might not have been fatal, but they seemed significant, because I could no longer even struggle. I couldn't so much as put my hands on the gauntlets on my collar.

“Wh-What’s your deal? What’re you trying to do? What’s your grudge—why are you doing this?”

I was being overly talkative, since talking was all I could do. Even if it was only air reverberating in the armor to make those whistling noises, I couldn’t deny the feeling that it spoke.

If it did.

If we could communicate—we’d be able to negotiate.

I didn’t think I could converse with an aberration the way these ruins’ former resident, Mèmè Oshino, could—but he might have said something like: All riled up and ready to fight. Something good happen to you?

Actually, we’d attacked first.

Sure, Kanbaru had acted in order to defend me, but you could also see this situation as us trying to bum-rush an armored warrior who politely knocked on the door before entering the room.

The shoulder tackle it gave me was just about its only explicit attack against us, and even now, you could say it helped me up—

“Gah!!”

Okay, you couldn’t say that.

It opened its hands, released my collar, and let me fall as gravity dictated, just to grab me again—but now that I’d fallen, it grabbed not my collar but my neck.

With one hand.

Strangling me.

I could feel it holding back, but it still showed little mercy—its hand around my throat as if to snap my neck, let alone stop my breathing.

“Guh…gah…ghaah!”

No, that wasn't it.

And that's why it was holding back.

The armored warrior was grasping my throat to shut me up. The one thing I could do… By strangling me, it was cutting off my jumbled questions and keeping me from speaking to it. A clear rejection of communication.

Yet I also felt a kind of consumption.

A draining of energy.

Leaving me through my grasped neck.

Stealing from me.

My vision grew blurry my consciousness dim.

"…"

And then.

Over the armored warrior's shoulders I saw Kanbaru standing up again. Her feet were unsteady, but I could sense the will in her eyes as they met mine. Yes, Suruga Kanbaru was an experienced team player indeed, but why was she making eye contact with me?

Don't come this way…

If you can move, then get out of here already.

Or so I wished to say, but that too was impossible while being strangled. Although I didn't know if I had it in me as a total non-athlete, I had no choice but to return her eye contact.

Run.

I'm not running, her eyes replied briskly.

I was a bit shocked that Kanbaru and I were at a place where we could converse with mere looks but what was the point if she was going to shoot down whatever signs I sent her? Not that I had much

ground to stand on, being the first one of us who refused to run…

You be the one to run. I'm gonna make its knees buckle from behind, so use that as an opportunity.

…She was stupid even when we were communicating through eye contact alone.

She wanted to pull a prank? There weren't any knees in that armor to begin with—but at that very moment, as decisive as it was stupid—even as I had what might be my final thought.

The floor of the classroom burst into flames.

It emitted a pillar of flame as though an anti-personnel mine buried under the floor had exploded—and this pillar burned the warrior's gauntlet grasping my neck.

The flame was unbelievably intense, to the point that I fully expected it to burn straight through the armor—to give a familiar example, it looked like a Chinese restaurant's kitchen burner turned all the way up.

The armored warrior's hand, which could have crushed my throat and Adam's apple in the blink of an eye if it felt so inclined, reflexively let go because of the flames—allowing me, now free, to slam to the ground on my butt.

I had no time to celebrate my newfound sense of liberation, though—while I wished the sudden pillar of flame erupting from the floor had conveniently aimed for the warrior's arm, that was not the case. The first pillar happened to scorch its gauntlet, that's all.

One after another.

Like a dam had burst.

Like a chain reaction—flames came from below, all across the floor, spouting like fountains. These pillars piercing through the floor did not then sputter out, but continued on to the ceiling—given their force, they must have passed through the third and fourth floor ceilings, too, all the way to the roof.

These flames seemed like physically destructive hammers pounding their way up from below—in an aggressive game of Whack-A-Mole, if you want to put it that way.

Now on my butt, I more rolled than crawled to avoid the successive erupting pillars to make my way to Kanbaru—not that I and my scrap-of-silk uselessness meeting back up with her would accomplish anything. In fact, I could even expose her to danger if the armored warrior chased after me.

Kanbaru being Kanbaru, she stepped her way around the flames—her evasion skill, the way her body could move on its own in spite of not understanding what was going on, proved what a top-notch athlete she was.

What was going on?

Obviously, I assumed these piercing lances of flame were yet another aberrational phenomenon brought on by the armored warrior—but given how I had the pillars to thank for being freed from its hold, maybe not.

Even now, the cage of flaming pillars, the fiery fence I'd crawled through without an inch to spare, separated me from the armored warrior. Almost as if the flames were a wall protecting us—still, I had a hard time believing things were that convenient. Our side of the flaming cage was fiery enough.

So then?

What were these pillars?

"…Miss Hanekawa."

Kanbaru muttered a name, but why—Hanekawa? Why bring her up all of a sudden?

Nothing about fire or flames said Hanekawa to me—if anyone, wouldn't it be the Fire Sisters, my two little sisters Karen Araragi and Tsukihi Araragi?

But I was in no position to ask—the flames continued to burst forth

in one place after another.

So many columns rose up that I barely had anywhere to stand—when a fiery lance climbed as high as it could go, that wasn't the end of it. Naturally, the fire then spread from the opened holes.

Ruins are, in general, full of flammable objects—and the classroom we were in was already stained an irrevocable shade of red.

None of the earlier darkness was left, but even amidst the flames—the armor's red shade stood out.

This wasn't the kind of fire where you hoped the firefighters would make it in time.

I had to get to safety asap when it was bad as this—hadn't I taken part in yearly drills since elementary school for precisely this moment?

Even I couldn't joke around and claim that "R-A-C-E" stood for "Really Adorable Children in Elementary"—just as I'd learned, it was Rescue, Alert, Contain, and Extinguish.

But.

There was no hope of containing or extinguishing this.

Forget about rescue—but as the armored warrior and I glared at each other across the flaming fence between us—an alert.

"Time to give it up, alas!"

Clearly.

This time.

The armored warrior—spoke in a way I could understand.

"It appears as though a full-fledged nuisance hath introduced itself—perhaps we've tread on the tiger's tail? I've no hope of handling this as I am now! It seems I've come at a bad time—my master appears to be away as well… I shall try again! Ye too, do not

dally and make thy way home at once!”

Its words suddenly grown fluent.

Fluent, lively, even refreshing.

As though all its earlier muffled, instrument-like noises were a lie.

I tried to accompany my surprise with a reaction.

As I am now?

A bad time? My master?

What was it talking about?

I wanted to bombard it with questions—but couldn’t because my throat hurt.

…No, that’s not it.

This wasn’t about a sore throat or something.

When the armored warrior grasped my neck tight—it had absorbed my voice.

Energy drain.

Just as it reproduced Kanbaru’s tackle.

It now reproduced—my voice.

The fluent delivery made some amount of sense in that case, and so did an aged manner of speech that matched its archaic, even anachronistic attire.

Still.

Although the armored warrior was free to speak in any manner it wished—there was no way I could turn a blind eye to what it said next.

Given its traditional Japanese trappings—uttering a Western name

called the character's entire historical background into question.

"When ye meet Kissshot next, tell her this! I will be coming to retrieve my precious enchanted blade Kokorowatari after a little more recovery! Yes, no armored warrior is complete without a blade! Indeed, it has been four hundred years since I lent it to her, so tell her to be prepared for a late fee! Hahahaha!"

Hahahaha, the voice laughed□though the jaw of the helm maintained its expression of fury.

"Ha!"Ha!"Haha!"Hahaha!"Hahahaha!"Hahahahaha!"Hahahaha!"Hahahaha

005

With those attention-grabbing parting words and roaring laugh, the armored warrior seemed to blend into the fire's black smoke and to disappear, just as it had promised—while the chapter has changed, the danger Kanbaru and I faced was far from over.

As beings of mostly flesh and blood, Kanbaru and I couldn't escape from the swirling flames by turning into what seemed like mist the way the warrior had.

The fiery sea engulfing the classroom was so thick you could nearly swim in it. The route to every exit, whether door or window, had been shut off—the fact that there was still enough space for us to make if not our last stand, then our last sit, seemed like the miracle of the century.

Of course, these would simply be our last moments if we didn't do something…

"What was that, my dear senior? That armored warrior—I found it strange that it didn't carry a sword, but the enchanted blade Kokorowatari? Isn't that—and also, Kissshot…"

"That…can wait…until later," I let out a disjointed reply.

In part because my throat wouldn't heal and I was dealing with a scratchy voice—not to mention, barely any humidity remained in the room among the rising flames, making it hard to talk. But even apart from all that, I wanted to leave it for later.

Honestly, I didn't even want to think about it then.

It was enough to fill my brain past its bursting point—what I needed to think about first and foremost was how to get Kanbaru out of the burning building without any harm coming to her.

This cram school engulfed in roaring flames.

If I had any degree of vampirism left in me, I might've shielded her and gallantly plunged through the flames and out of the building to safety—but even someone as bad at thinking things through as yours truly could figure that one out. I doubted I could even make it to the door—maybe I could get to a window if I didn't mind burning my feet, but unfortunately, it was just too risky to dive out of a second-floor window with injured, beet-red feet.

Staying in the classroom would be worse—forget about risk, the chances of dying in there were sky high. They say suffocation is the cause of most fire-related deaths.

But our predicament seemed like one of the exceptions implied by that "most"—the lances of flame continued to pierce the floor below us with no signs of slowing or stopping. The raging flames were just making that hard to see, but it wasn't abating in any way.

You couldn't tell from inside.

From outside, though, the entire building must have looked like a single flaming lance—a shaft piercing the heavens.

I'd had hopes for a dramatic twist, like a column shooting from below providing an opening in the floor we could use to escape, but things are never that easy in the real world. While the flames left holes that a person could fit through, looking down them to the floor below revealed a hellfire I wish I'd never seen.

The steel and concrete had grown molten.

By that logic, the holes in the ceiling might offer a lucky escape route—but how could I reach it now that my body was back to its regular settings? The chairs I might've stacked up to stand on were already a blazing shade of red and looked like some sort of torture device.

"Wait, hold on. Kanbaru, what if you tried… You might not be able to get a running start, but maybe two steps or so of momentum… just might be enough…for you to reach the ceiling? Wouldn't you

be able to scramble up there? And then…we could use the elevator shaft to go from the third floor to the first, and□"

"You're overestimating your junior. My legs aren't that strong," Kanbaru immediately rejected my scraggy-voiced proposal. She wanted me to know just how ridiculous it was. "Even I can't leap all the way to the ceiling, certainly not with an older boy in my arms."

"I see."

Well.

It's not like she'd escape alone even if I told her to□as loyal as my junior was, she never listened to me. I needed to assume there was no way to save her and her alone.

A high school girl who lived in total opposition to Mèmè Oshino's dictum that people just go and get saved on their own… Perhaps such a philosophy was understandable, given her background, but at the same time, the idea that the third floor would be any better than the first or second was nothing more than pure optimism…

We were caught between a rock and a hard place□what's the right expression when it's flames on all sides?

"Senpai."

"What is it, Kanbaru?"

"Will you be my first?"

"Don't give up yet!"

She had a scary way of accepting her fate!

A confession, now?

Stop trying to push how girly you are.

"I don't want to die a virgin."

"Don't make admissions like that, either. You know, this sort of

thing is why people skipped the story where you were the main character.”

She was more unafraid than me two, or even several times over. I couldn’t keep up with her—at this rate, she might turn this into a lovers’ suicide.

Couldn’t she be a little more serious? In the middle of a fire, at least?

You’re never going to be serious in your life if you can’t act serious here… Then again, her life was going to end here if we didn’t do something.

“Heh. Well, it’s fine. This isn’t a bad way to die—I’d be happy if I got to die with you.”

“Um, Kanbaru? Sorry, but I don’t feel that extreme a way about you.”

“What? That hurts.”

I had to make it clear to her, even if it hurt—in fact, I wouldn’t even feel happy dying with Senjogahara, my girlfriend. In May, during Golden Week, I was consumed with the notion of dying for Hanekawa’s sake, but it wasn’t like I wanted to die with her.

The list of people I’d die with—was only one name long.

A lone, golden-haired aberration.

Who wasn’t here…

Which was exactly why—we needed to escape from this flaming building alive.

“Fine,” I said, “I’m just going to accept it.”

“Hm? Oh, you’re going to accept my first time?”

“No, I couldn’t ever accept something so huge. I mean the risk—our only option is to jump out a window and pray for the best. It’s

better than burning to death here, right?”

“Yeah… I was thinking about how that was our only option, too.”

Liar. You were thinking about something completely different.

“Who knows, there might even be a car parked below us, and we can land on its roof.”

“I’ve never been that lucky in my life before…”

That was the sort of thing that happened to Tsukihi, maybe. It’d be very much like her to emerge alive from a sea of flames—like a phoenix.

But wasn’t I her brother? Couldn’t I get as lucky at least once in my life?

I wasn’t sure if we could even make it to a window through these flames—but standing around and being indecisive was a far worse use of our time.

And wasting it on banter? Unthinkable.

The two of us stood, an arm around each other’s shoulders as if we were getting ready to run a three-legged race—the flames and the shimmering heat made the path ahead of us anything but visible. We were trying to make sure not to get separated during our run, and also guarding against one of us stepping in the many holes opened in the floor. If either of us was about to fall, the other could immediately help.

“Okay,” Kanbaru said. “In a 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 rhythm.”

“Why are we using the Fibonacci sequence as our rhythm?”

“Just match my pace.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The slower runner needs to set the pace.”

“Remember. Right foot first.”

“Wait, I know I likened it to a three-legged race, but our legs aren’t tied together. It shouldn’t matter which leg we step with first…”

“And when I say right, I mean my right.”

“We’re facing the same way.”

“I’m a lefty, though, so I sometimes get right and left mixed up.”

“You really expect me to match the finer points of how you process the world?”

We continued our banter as though we were in some sort of Hollywood movie, and maybe it was somehow appropriate given the daring escape we were about to attempt.

In any case, we took our first step.

Onward toward our desperate ploy, fully prepared for severe burns.

After everything she said, Kanbaru dared start with her left leg, while I took off with my right□however.

However, our first steps were the only one we took.

The window we saw as our way out□with neither frame nor glass, really more of a rectangular hole to begin with□instantaneously expanded in every direction.

The window…spread along the entire wall.

A large amount of oxygen gushing into a burning building through an open door or broken window magnifies the fire’s scale as a natural chemical result□the phenomenon is known as a backdraft.

That’s exactly what happened.

Earlier, I likened the vertical flaming spears rising from directly under us to mines, and if I were to continue the comparison□this backdraft was a plastic explosive.

The blast originated at the very spot we were hoping to rush

through, which is to say right in front of us—inflicting an inordinate amount of damage.

Ah. The “Contain” in “Rescue, Alert, Contain, and Extinguish” wasn’t there for show, and this was a head-on collision.

But Kanbaru and I weren’t the only ones to be affected by this fresh blast of fire—the flames themselves were blown out.

For a moment.

Only temporarily, of course—but the backdraft quelled the flames in the classroom by force.

“This is like how they sometimes fight fire with dynamite…”

Then, sure enough.

As I said this—from beyond the broken wall came a violent sorcerer’s doll shikigami, a tsukumogami of a human corpse used for a hundred years—Yotsugi Ononoki.

I know I’m repeating myself, but we were on the second floor.

Literally above ground level.

Didn’t matter to her.

With her grip strength, impressive even among the inhuman beings I know, Ononoki supported herself by holding onto a flat wall—and spoke to me, expressionless and emotionless.

“Don’t think you can die out here. I’m going to be the one to kill you, monstieur.”

“…”

What kind of character was she this time around?

006

I of course didn't recall doing anything to make Ononoki hate me to the point of wanting to kill me, and she rescued Kanbaru and me from inside the blazing building in a fairly normal way. My junior had flopped on the floor unconscious due to the impact of the backdraft and its explosive fire-fighting effects, so I put her on my back before clinging onto Ononoki. The energy drain had already brought Kanbaru close to her limit—despite her messing around, she'd been forcing herself to hold on, so I had no reservations at all as her senior about carrying her.

True, I nearly screamed something out in exasperation.

Why was she seriously not wearing a bra?!

Given the scale of the fire, it was a miracle that we made it out of there without serious burns—but I wasn't exactly heaving a sigh of relief, either.

If I had to find a silver lining, it was that the fire wasn't spreading beyond the building. These ruins were isolated, so perhaps I should say it's a good thing there were no nearby structures.

And then, without the help of any fire trucks rushing to the scene, the abandoned cram school, filled with memories both good and bad ever since spring break, burned itself out—fizzled out, you might say, like a candle's flame.

Only cinders lacking any semblance of their original form were left behind—and all I could do was look up with vacant eyes as I crouched near Kanbaru's prone form, unable to so much as stand.

A sense of loss.

No, I wasn't so attached to those ruins that I felt a sense of loss—but something that had stood there so naturally was gone all of a

sudden, and I couldn't hide my shock at the fact.

It was as if□yes.

My connection, not to the building itself so much as to the guy, the expert who'd taken up residence there□had vanished completely.

As if the place he might return to was no more□but that was ridiculous, how could that vagabond have any place to return to? He was only stopping by in this town too□he drifted through, and the abandoned building was just shelter from the rain to him.

Still, that said□for the place to disappear in mere minutes?

Razed to nothing.

That felt wrong.

"Sorry to interrupt your sentimentalizing, monstieur, but what exactly happened?"

Ononoki.

She said this from behind me, expressionless and emotionless□rushing a conclusion without any consideration for my complicated feelings.

"I can't blame you for brooding over that snail girl, but don't go attempting a murder-suicide with a random girl you found."

"Even your misunderstandings are excessive."

A random girl?

She meant my adorable junior.

"Her name is Suruga Kanbaru."

"Oh, really. So she's□"

Miss Gaen's niece, Ononoki said, not sounding particularly interested□and she probably wasn't.

“The former Suruga Gaen. Suruga Kanbaru after Miss Gaen’s elder sister□”

“If anything, Ononoki, I should be asking you why you’re here. As far as I remember, your role isn’t to be some girl who’s always ready to dash in and save me whenever I’m in a tight spot.”

“It seems I’m the only one assigned to that task as of late. I wish they’d give me a break. I get called to do audio commentary all the time, too.”

“I can’t say that’s my fault.”

“Even if it isn’t, I wish you’d take responsibility for it. That’s why you’re around, right? To take responsibility.”

“You think whoever’s responsible exists only to take responsibility? And don’t make me responsible for everything in the world.”

“Well, I just happened to be around, I wasn’t planning on saving you or anything, monstieur.”

Her words sounded cold, depending on how you interpreted them□but nothing about her was either hot or cold.

Yotsugi Ononoki has no will.

She was just stating the facts of the matter.

“I was only doing my job□when I found you dragging a woman I don’t know into a murder-suicide. I thought, ‘Boy, do I need to mess up your plans,’ that’s all.”

“Sounds like you have a hell of a will to me…”

Please, it wasn’t a murder-suicide.

And what’s with this “need” to mess up my plans?

“Well, I need to toy with whatever your plans are, whether that’s a murder-suicide or a pedo-suicide.”

“Just how much do you hate me?”

“I don’t hate you. I just want to Toys-R-Ound with you.”

“What does that even mean? Stop inventing new phrases whenever you feel like it.”

I also let it slide, but what’s a pedo-suicide, anyway?

She wasn’t talking about what happened with Hachikuji, was she?

“I like you if anything,” the shikigami said. “Hm? Oh, did your heart just skip a beat there?”

“You’ve turned into a pretty annoying character in the short time since we last met…”

What happened in just a half-day or so…

In any case, I’d lost count of how many times Ononoki had rescued me. I wanted to show my gratitude to her somehow, but she wasn’t making it easy, ruffling my feelings. Still, this time she’d saved not just me, but Kanbaru too—how could I not thank her?

“Well, Ononoki. Thank you. I know my debt to you keeps getting larger and larger, but I promise to return the favor someday.”

“What are you scheming? Are you hoping to get another kiss out of me by being noble?”

Such was Ononoki’s reaction—it felt like there was no point in thanking her, and uh, I guess that did happen…

“Sorry to dash your hopes, but I did that to harass you. You’re not getting a kiss from me when you’re hoping for one.”

“Then you’re not sorry about dashing my hopes at all.”

It was harassment…

Now that she mentioned it, that case was far from settled.

“So, monstieur. If you want to repay me, I’d normally want you to

do so by bringing me immense wealth. But I'll accept an answer to my question this time around. What exactly happened?"

"What happened?"

"I'll lend an ear, if you'd just open up to me."

"As if I'd ever come to you for life advice."

Whatever she said and however she said it, her words always sounded wooden. No matter what kind of retort or reaction I gave, it sounded like me getting worked up on my own, which I have to admit was depressing.

Still, my sorrow forced me to cool off□my heart had been pounding since those raging flames, but my pulse seemed to be returning to normal.

Usually, she'd be the last person I'd open up to, but if she was willing to listen to my troubles despite being on the job, maybe I just had to accept her kindness and□hm?

Hold on, no.

What was that again? She wasn't planning on saving me, she just happened to see a fire at her job site□and decided to lift a finger because that fire was engulfing us.

Then asking me "what exactly happened" and attempting to get my story was nothing more than part of her job, not any kind of kindness. You certainly couldn't say it was out of goodwill.

"Phew…that was close, Ononoki. I nearly got the mistaken impression that you like me or something. I was beginning to think, Is she into me or what?"

"I just told you that I like you. Stop running from the kindness of others. You cowardly little chicken."

"…"

She was awfully insulting for someone who liked me.

I couldn't tell how serious she was being, at all.

"If you can't bring yourself to accept my kindness, I wouldn't mind if you just accepted my body. Of course, me being a corpse, I doubt you'd be able to show it on TV. That's fine, right? The anime's basically over at this point."

"What did you talk about with whom in the past half-day to turn into your current character?"

Such a blasé character, too… Clawing at my teenage heartstrings like that…

Even if I couldn't accept anything of hers, I might at least answer her and explain what happened□but as far as nonsensical experiences went, nothing could outdo the one I'd just gone through.

No matter how cogent my explanation, the listener would think I'd gone crazy: a warrior in a full set of armor appearing after I met up with someone in an abandoned building; countless shafts of flame shooting up from below; getting trapped in a fiery cage; and the armored warrior then making a leisurely exit?

I was only able to tell Ononoki without worrying because she was an expert and an aberrational phenomenon herself, a familiar.

"Hmm. I don't understand at all. I think you've gone crazy, monstieur."

"Hey…"

"Don't worry, I'm kidding. You can laugh, you know. I can't completely deny that it doesn't make sense, though. Hm, an armored warrior?" As if to make absolutely sure, Ononoki said, "And it automatically rebuilds itself even if it gets scattered to pieces and can use an energy drain?"

"Yeah."

Hearing its abilities shortened down to a list of bullet points made it sound suspicious even to me, who'd not only witnessed the thing

but been attacked by it. Still, being too strange to be real wasn't grounds to deny its existence in this case.

Aberrations are aberrant by nature.

I hadn't told Ononoki everything, though. Not that I was trying to hide anything from someone who'd saved my life—in fact, supplying her with the whole truth was the smart thing to do.

Why not fully rely on this shikigami, who surely knew far more about the subject than I did? Any weird sense of pride or vanity on my part would only get in the way.

Yet I couldn't disclose it all to her, couldn't but hesitate when it came to passing off something that I still hadn't fully processed myself. I hadn't—which isn't to say I couldn't tell her because it made no sense whatsoever. Rather, I couldn't tell Ononoki because she just might make sense of it.

The armored warrior's parting words.

The unthinkable, un-Japanese syllables—Kissshot.

The name that even I no longer called her—he used it.

The enchanted blade, Kokorowatari…

"…"

Ononoki gazed down at me, silent.

You couldn't call her tall. If anything, with her tween-girl design, she's short, but even then, her eyes were above mine as I hunched over, close to the ground. For some reason I found it a pretty significant strain on my psyche to be looked down on by the expressionless, emotionless girl.

I'd done nothing wrong, but I almost felt like apologizing.

"I'd say it's a bad thing to keep secrets from your savior, wouldn't you?"

“No… It’s just…”

How was she so sensitive to my emotions when she had none?

Savior, though?

I wondered again if I should tell her, but still had my misgivings. Maybe it was because telling her would feel like lying to her.

I mean there’s no way it could be true.

If that armored warrior’s identity was who I thought it was, the exact existence I already knew about but there was no way that could be true.

He couldn’t possibly exist in this world.

The thought, the line of reasoning had to be wrong so I couldn’t give voice to it carelessly. It had to be a mistake on my part.

If I was going to, I at least needed to check with Shinobu first so I tried to distract Ononoki by changing the subject.

Actually, I guess it was more like moving our conversation along than changing its subject.

“Do you have any ideas, Ononoki? About this armored warrior does it have anything to do with your current task?”

I did feel like I was late to asking this question how could I not? Thanks to her task, she’d gotten me out of my tight spot.

From what I’d heard so far, though, she didn’t seem to be chasing an aberrational phenomenon that dangerous all on her own…

“Well, true,” Ononoki nodded.

Expressionless.

“Yes you’re right. While it’s within the range of my official duties, according to what you’re saying it’s an almost entirely different phenomenon from my fieldwork target.”

“?”

“Remember what I just told you? I wasn’t lying when I said it didn’t make sense to me. It seems to have grown far more ferocious than when I was looking for it. What could have happened over the course of these few days?”

It wasn’t even an armored warrior when I was after it Ononoki remarked, tilting her head this time, but her expressionlessness made it seem like she didn’t find it all that strange.

Then again, she herself had undergone quite a change in character over the course of just half a day. It didn’t seem that strange for an aberrational phenomenon she was after to change, too but still.

Yeah, that wasn’t it.

That armored warrior had to be special not even a special case, but a special exception. Take how strong it had gotten in the mere minutes that we fought. The armor was nothing more than a heavy, dull object at first but roared with laughter by the time it left.

Its energy drain…

Then it grew strong enough to confuse Ononoki thanks to no one but me and Kanbaru…

How could I not feel responsible in that case it really made me the responsible party here. But…

“Hey, Ononoki?”

“What is it, monstieur?”

I replied without giving any pushback to the ridiculous nickname she’d managed to establish for me. “Do you think we could call this one off?”

“…”

“Er, wait, no I’m fine with it. I don’t mind, but…her,” I said, pointing at Kanbaru’s form lying on the ground.

I guess it's true that top-class athletes know how to rest for real when they need to? It felt really off to be concerned for her when she was happily (just look at that smug face) snoring away.

"It's okay if Kanbaru leaves, right?"

Ononoki stayed quiet for a moment, then asked, "What's that mean?" Her flat tone made her sound angry, but she didn't possess that emotion—she was asking because she simply didn't understand. "Monstieur, are you going to renege on your promise to Miss Gaen?"

"Renege?"

"You leaned on Miss Gaen and promised in return that you'd introduce this girl to her. Even if it was something you absolutely had to do to save Mayoi Hachikuji and you had no choice, a promise is still a promise—you've really got some guts, monstieur. Trying to break a promise with Miss Gaen? You're going to make me fall for you."

"That's…not what I'm trying to do."

I would be, in effect—but honestly, hadn't I already lived up to my promise? I thought I had.

"You've really got some abs on you."

"Don't touch on the subject of my abs."

"Oh, I'd love to touch them."

"Stop showing such unusual interest in my muscles."

"I'm a corpse, you know. My interest in flesh is almost instinctual—your reason?"

"Hm?"

"Your reason for trying to break your promise with Miss Gaen."

"I'm not unwilling to introduce Kanbaru to her, even now. But

that's not all the promise was, right? She was trying to get Kanbaru to help her with a job."

That was the full picture of the promise I made with Miss Gaen—with Izuko Gaen, head boss of the experts on the supernatural and senior to Mèmè Oshino, Deishu Kaiki, and Yozuru Kagenui.

In return for leaning on the wisdom of a woman who boasted that she knew everything, I'd bring Kanbaru with me to follow up on Ononoki's job, which I'd interrupted regardless of the circumstances.

Miss Gaen had said—she needed Kanbaru's left hand, her left arm.

By no means had she asked me to introduce her to Kanbaru out of some desire to be reunited at long last with her niece.

I was the one who'd leaned on Miss Gaen's wisdom, of course, and Kanbaru had nothing to do with it. Hence, I'd made the promise on the condition that I'd only do it if Kanbaru agreed—but I'd messed up from the start.

I knew full well that Kanbaru would never turn down a request from me—and as a result, I'd exposed her to unthinkable danger.

I'd gotten her, a complete bystander, involved.

As her senior, I ought to have declined on her behalf.

"Yes. It's as if Miss Gaen tricked you there, monstieur. She told you it's a simple task anyone could do, didn't she?"

"No, not like she was recruiting someone for a little gig."

"A simple job that even you could do."

"Can it."

"Still, and I have no duty to cover for Miss Gaen, I doubt she expected an entire building to end up burning down right then."

No duty to cover for her… Why exactly was Ononoki acting as an extension of Miss Gaen, then? This was Izuko Gaen, the self-described woman who knows everything—how could anyone be certain that she hadn't predicted it? Or was I being too paranoid?

"As someone involved in this case from the start, monstieur, the fire seems particularly unusual—you're even making it sound like it saved you."

"…"

That did seem true.

Sure, we nearly ended up burning to death, but if a pillar of flame hadn't erupted from below when the armored warrior had me by the neck—wouldn't the life have been choked out of me right then and there?

It managed to take my voice.

But it might've taken a lot more.

What did it say again—the tiger's tail?

"Well, I guess it doesn't explain anything," Ononoki retracted her point. "After all, your junior did get killed."

"She's not dead."

"Um, her condition took a sudden turn. It looks like she's dead?"

"What?!"

I checked Kanbaru's breathing and pulse in a panic. I even opened her eyelids to check her pupils.

She was just as alive as ever.

"Whoopsie, I lied. Wow, you really fell for that one."

"Don't make me kick your ass."

I grabbed my tween-girl savior's head with both hands. A bystander

might have thought I was getting ready to kiss her, but I wanted to straight-up headbutt her.

“To be fair, monstieur, whenever you and I chat, someone usually ends up dead nearby.”

“Stop inventing creepy rules that are incredibly close to the truth.”

“I understand how you feel. But I think you ought to give up. I can’t recommend it,” Ononoki suddenly returned to the matter at hand even though I was still gripping her head. “I’m warning you as a friend.”

“I don’t recall us ever becoming friends…”

“I’ve thought of you as a friend for a long time now.”

“…”

In the right time, the right place, and from the right person, I’d be happy to hear those words…but I wasn’t so sure this was it.

Well, fine, it did make me glad. I can’t deny that it cast a glaring light on the small size of my circle of friends.

“I’m of course grateful to Miss Gaen, and I’d like to pay her back in any way I can, but like you’ve said, Ononoki, the conditions have changed□this isn’t a safe job anymore. If she weren’t Kanbaru, she’d be dead a few times over by now.”

“And now she’s died yet another time.”

“That joke didn’t land the first time, so stop playing off of it.”

“Consider the fact that a corpse is telling it.”

“That makes it even less funny.”

“It’s far too late to turn back now,” Ononoki said, her voice composed.

Nothing was harder to get out of her than coherence. Otherwise,

she wouldn't have saved us for no logical reason like some superhero.

"It's too late, monstieur. Don't get me wrong, it's up to you whether you want to break your promise to Miss Gaen. You have the freedom to ruin the rest of your life that way."

"What… Breaking a promise to her is tantamount to ruining my entire life?" To be honest, I wasn't prepared for that—I just wanted to get Kanbaru back home safely. "I-I was planning on working hard to make up for her absence, but that wouldn't do?"

"How incredibly conceited of you. How vein-poppingly vain. Do you really think you could take the place of Miss Gaen's niece?"

"That's how strong her bloodline is?"

"Even if you could—it wouldn't accomplish your goal."

"My goal?"

"You want to protect your junior now that you've gotten her wrapped up in your mess. I understand, I once felt the same way myself."

"Don't say things just because they sound cool."

You don't have any juniors.

Stop drawing the drama vs. comedy borderline within the same set of quotation marks.

"I will admit," Ononoki said, "that you make the situation sound worse than Miss Gaen's rundown of it—but why can't you see that having the girl go home after all of this'd do nothing to protect her?"

"Hm? Wait, what do you mean by that?"

"Merely seeing an aberration can get you afflicted—merely meeting one can get you cursed. Yet you say the girl touched the armored warrior."

“…”

More than touched… She punched it.

Even if she couldn’t pull it off, she fearlessly tried to give it a double-leg takedown too… If all aberrations are indeed divine in a way, you’d be lucky to get off with nothing more than a curse.

Right.

Suruga Kanbaru was already involved.

Not due to any promise of mine to Miss Gaen. You could call it a promise with the world a contract that can’t be broken, whose terms are non-negotiable.

“Please kneel, monstieur.”

“Hm?”

“Kneel. Hurry up.”

“…”

“At once. Expeditiously.”

How might I explain this to you?

I had no reason to obey any sudden command, unless it was a rare one like a tween girl demanding that I kneel, but this was precisely such an instance…so I took my hands off of Ononoki’s head and kneeled as she directed.

Both shins to the ground, my hands atop my thighs.

“Wait just a second. It won’t be long,” Ononoki said. Raising one leg, she began taking off her boot and tights. Why was she baring her foot now? I was about to find out.

Because she took her foot, fresh out of her boot, and stepped on my face.

At a perpendicular angle.

She grinded it into my cheek.

“Um, Ononoki?”

“You’d damn well better not think you can turn back now,” she said, but not in a violent tone. In the same wooden voice as always: “Whether it’s this or what happened with Mayoi Hachikuji—what you lack is resolve. I bet you think that you could start your life over from the beginning whenever you feel like it.”

“…”

“You think it’s never too late to start anything, don’t you? Even if you fail or slip up, you think you can always come back from it, don’t you? Even if you mess up, you think you can always make up for it, don’t you?”

“…”

Grind, grind.

Ononoki shoved her heel into my face as I kneeled, her knee at a deft angle as she daintily held the edge of her skirt between her fingers.

She was stepping on the same spot that Kanbaru had kneed earlier… Was my cheek a rest area for girls’ legs or something?

It was strange. Having a bare foot step on my face felt nothing at all like having the back of my head stepped on… I reflexively closed my eyes, but when I forced them open, I was so close to seeing up Ononoki’s skirt—in between her big toe and second toe.

She was standing on one leg, proof that this warrior-girl’s sheer strength was nothing to make light of.

“Everything evens out by the time you reach the end of your life—is that what you think? Hah. ’Course it does. Once you die, you’re left with nothing. Zero.”

As wooden as ever—but her tone didn’t suggest a lack of thoughts or ideas behind her words. Something that I said must have poked at a

tender spot somewhere in her heart.

If dolls had hearts.

“Umm, what were we talking about again?” she asked.

“Beats me…”

“Was it about you getting excited that my feet are all sweaty from wearing boots in the summer?”

“Could you not be so direct? Let’s keep it dreamy.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a corpse, so my feet can’t get sweaty.”

“Oh…”

“You sound so disappointed… Come on, it hurts to see you look that way. Okay, so as far as what you should be doing next”

“Hey! Don’t just move on like it’s a given that I’m disappointed!”

“Let’s move on to another time.”

“No! Take it easy, whether they’re subjects or time!”

“Learn to keep up with me. I can’t slow down to your pace if you’re going to be such a sloth.”

Apparently satisfied, Ononoki took her foot off my face… I’d like to think I showed you just how big of a man I am by not showing any signs of resistance the entire time.

I did have an excellent reason not to: if she’d used her foot there to activate her Unlimited Rulebook, she could’ve vaporized my head.

“I personally think you showed how deep your sins run, not how big of a man you are. So, monstieur, if you really do care about this girl, that’s all the more reason for you to take her to Miss Gaen and not do something as irresponsible as send her home. From there, you could have Miss Gaen keep her safe.”

“Have Miss Gaen…”

“That’s right. You could keep your promise and her safe,” Ononoki restated in a half-clever manner. Despite the forcedness and artificiality, the message itself was revelatory.

She was right.

Sending Kanbaru home might be the far more irresponsible thing to do. I’d gotten her wrapped up in what you could call my own selfish circumstances, and now I wanted to shutter up and throw her back to her home just because things hadn’t gone exactly as I’d planned. How could I be so sure that was the right thing to do?

Kanbaru had crossed paths with it.

Though a total bystander—she’d crossed paths with that armored warrior and gotten herself involved in whatever phenomenon it was. In some ways, even more than me.

In which case sending her home, to be on her own, might be far more dangerous as Ononoki said—if we were talking about responsibility, wasn’t working alongside Kanbaru until the end the responsible thing to do?

Well, the best move might’ve been to ditch this job whose details I didn’t even know and go home with Kanbaru, but I, a student studying for college exams, couldn’t afford my freedom to break my promise with Miss Gaen and ruin the rest of my life.

Aside from that, I wanted to keep my promises.

Promises should be kept.

…No, I’ll be honest with you.

Of course I didn’t want to get Kanbaru involved with that dangerous armored warrior—but that isn’t to say that I didn’t want to get involved with it.

If anything.

I had to get involved with it.

That thing had entrusted me with a message.

A message to “my master.”

So at the very least, I couldn’t abandon my role until I’d delivered it. If the armored warrior was who I thought it was—as impossible as that seemed, if there was so much as the slightest possibility of it being true.

I couldn’t throw it away.

I couldn’t go home—not until I knew.

“…”

“It seems you’ve reached a conclusion.”

My goodness, having friends can be such a hassle, muttered Ononoki, putting her tights and boot back on. Frankly, even if her feet didn’t get sweaty, wearing boots in the summer did sound uncomfortable, but I wasn’t dispensing any unsolicited advice about other people’s life choices.

Though I guess they’d be un-life choices in Ononoki’s case.

…What kind of girl had she been when she was still alive?

According to what I’d heard, she’d acquired her current demeanor and temperament after being born as an aberration…

Still, whether she was a familiar or just an animated object, if she was capable of doing this much on her own, why hadn’t her master, the diviner Yozuru Kagenui, given her just one more feature, the ability to make facial expressions? It seemed strange.

Personally, I just wanted to see Ononoki smile…

“I’m going to try to chase down this armored warrior you say you saw—I doubt I’ll be able to find it, given the way it disappeared, but my job is to tread forth on fools’ errands.”

“…”

“My job is to tread forth on fools’ errands and your face.”

“Don’t bother correcting yourself, or making it your job to step on my face.”

“Carry this niece of yours in your arms like you’re a newlywed couple, all the way to Miss Gaen. Then explain what’s going on to her.”

“You’re making it sound like Kanbaru’s my niece…”

Not to mention, few people would seem more out of place on the receiving end of a bridal carry than Kanbaru… Just let me carry her on my back like before.

“My Neighbor Totoro had a niece too□”

“If you’re talking about Mei, her name meant May rather than niece.”

“Let me finish my jokes before quipping off of them. Anyway, I’m sure that if you give a wholehearted and sincere explanation to Miss Gaen, she wouldn’t try to get you to help her with a dangerous job. My hunch is that you’ll satisfy her expectations just by bringing her info about this armored warrior.”

“…”

“Whatever the case, it’s about time for us to part ways□you can stew in your emotions by these fire-ravaged remains, but the fire department and police will be showing up soon. If you want to avoid having any groundless suspicions placed on you, you ought to beat it.”

Part of being an expert is knowing when to retreat□Ononoki said as she finished putting her boot back on. She seemed to have worn it slowly on purpose so that we could talk for as long as possible.

She was expressionless the whole time.

…With both of my hands, I reached out towards Ononoki’s face once more□not out of anger, nor seeking revenge for having my

cheek trampled□but to somehow see her smile.

I was just plotting to see if forcing her facial muscles into the right positions could create something resembling a smile even on Ononoki's expressionless face.

It was the least I could do to pay back this friend, who'd saved both my life and Kanbaru's, and moreover given me valuable advice when I felt so faint of heart.

"Fwuh-fwye. Muhhn-suhhhr."

"…"

Creepy.

007

Fighting fires with dynamite reminded me that the Nobel Prize, established based on the will of the inventor of none other than the explosive material, seems to be awarded in the six fields of physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, peace, and economics, but not in math for some reason. It would seem like a natural fit among that lineup, but one story says that Nobel once had a rival in love who was a mathematician, which is why no prize in math was established—just an urban legend, of course, whose authenticity can't be verified, but the idea that love affairs can influence even something with global recognition like the Nobel Prize does make you think a bit. I don't know if I'm qualified to say this, as someone who's only ever experienced teenage love, but are those the kinds of feelings you end up carrying around with you beyond the grave? Do feelings of love for another—really never disappear, no matter how many years pass? Instead of turning them into memories or funny stories, or forgetting or idealizing them—do we let them linger on forever and ever in our hearts and minds, across world history?

When you think about it, anecdotes about great historical figures do tend to involve romance at one point or another. Heroes are known for their conquests, including in love—perhaps not a single tale could be told apart from that kind of thing, in reality.

Putting that aside, after having my way for a while with Ononoki, playing with her cheeks as I saw fit, she at last put on a serious (expressionless) face. "Lehh ahh lehh maah (Lay off, layman)," she said, angrily swatting me away like a pest, and stormed off—to get back to work.

To go after the armored warrior, probably.

You couldn't get the first idea which way it headed or where it was going based on my intel, but perhaps having the tools needed to

make that judgment was what made her a pro.

I wasn't certain what she meant by "lay off, layman" (was my handling of her cheeks inexpert, or was I an amateur when it came to aberrations?), but either way, I had to heed her warning. Even if I wasn't to blame for the fire at the abandoned cram school, I'd be tied up all night if I ended up getting interrogated as an involved party. They'd probably call my family too.

Please, I didn't want them knowing. My parents or my sisters.

I'd be burned alive. Sentenced to immolation.

In addition to this self-serving reason, to interpret Ononoki's warning broadly, I myself could spell trouble if I did get taken in (to the fire station? the police station?)—Kanbaru wasn't the only one who'd encountered the mysterious armored warrior, I had too.

Without any solid plan in mind, I piggybacked Kanbaru and started in the opposite direction from Ononoki—a course of action based on the shallow assumption that if she was following after him, we could avoid another encounter by traveling in the opposite direction.

Lacking my vampiric powers, I couldn't move at a fast pace with Kanbaru on my back. She was a girl but also a muscular athlete. I wanted to travel along the safest possible route until we reached our meeting spot with Miss Gaen.

I'd originally planned to meet Kanbaru at the abandoned cram school, explain the situation to her, and head on to this meeting spot together. In a circuitous or even convoluted way, my plan was back on track—but piggybacking someone your age is different from carrying a little sister or a tween girl.

It makes you strangely tense.

I'd have started to worry if she was out for too long, but once I walked for a good bit and the ruins were fully out of sight, my junior, Suruga Kanbaru, seemed to regain consciousness.

"Mmmmgh…"

“Oh. Up now?”

“Mmmmgh, no, senpai, I can’t… That’s too freaky for me…”

“Wake up! What’s that supposed to mean? How extreme of a personality do I have in your dreams?!”

What kind of act could possibly make Suruga Kanbaru hesitate?

Her head jerked up with an “Ah!” at my quip, and she glanced all around her—she was having trouble taking in the situation.

Since it was the backdraft that had knocked her out, it made no sense for her now to be on my back as we escaped through town—in fact, they say you forget what happened to you right before you went unconscious, so maybe she was surprised she wasn’t in the middle of her fight with the armored warrior. That made our close contact even worse… She might take me out with a rear naked choke.

Rear naked choke.

What a fitting technique name for Kanbaru.

“Oh—my dear senior! You’re okay!”

But there was no need for me to worry. The first words to come out of Kanbaru’s mouth (aside from the inappropriate things she said in her sleep) expressed concern for my wellbeing—what a shining example of a junior.

“Wh-What about that thing?! What happened to it?! That guy with the helmet with the character for ‘love’ on it?!”

“Um, it’s not like we were fighting Kanetsugu Naoe.”

Her memories were cloudy after all.

Still, they’d surely come back to her if that was as bad as it got—I stopped for a moment to let the now-conscious Kanbaru off my back.

She didn't get off.

In fact, she started clinging to me.

I'd let go of her legs, but she wrapped them around me and stuck to me like she really was going to give me a rear naked choke, refusing to get off of me. I was a eucalyptus tree, and she was a koala.

"What're you trying to do?"

"I don't know what's going on, but my instincts are telling me that I shouldn't let this opportunity get away."

"Some kind of instinct…"

Precisely what was it saying?

It needed to learn when to shut up.

"I don't think I can walk yet. You're gonna carry me on your back for now, we've decided," she informed me of their consensus.

Now her instincts were telling me things too?

Someone who couldn't walk had my torso in a leg scissors and wouldn't let go? Her legs had enough strength to split my body in two.

Plus, one of her arms was an aberration.

Don't act so spoiled, get down, walk on your own□rather than any of these things, what I said was, "Oh, fine. Just a little more, though. Don't expect me to baby you like this next time," doing my best to put on senior-like airs. Even I could tell how nervous and hollow I sounded… The airs I had put on were pretty hot ones.

"Whoa, I'm so close to the back of your head… I never knew life could get this good."

"Could you please not get excited over the back of my head?"

“Your hair whorl is so cool.”

“Don’t get worked up over parts of me that I don’t even know about, please.”

“You know, compared to when we first met, both you and I have grown our hair out.”

“Hm? Well, yeah.”

We were as friendly as could be now, to the point that I was carrying her on my back through the street at night, but come to think of it, we’d only started interacting a few months ago—Kanbaru still kept her hair short then, and mine wasn’t as long around the back then either.

“I’d really like to get my hair all in yours. Once we both have hair that’s a little longer, I’d like our locks to get joined together. Then maybe we could find a good bridge?”

“That’s something you do with padlocks, not locks of hair.”

Her level of perversion had gotten so extreme that it wasn’t even smut anymore.

Joining our locks together would just be painful.

“You think?” she asked. “But pain is a very important factor.”

“If it’s pain you want, you know I could just fall on my back right now.”

“No! Not right now. I might be okay physically, but mentally, I feel so fatigued—I kind of don’t feel good.”

“You don’t feel good…”

I couldn’t stop a shiver from going down my spine if she was this peppy even when she wasn’t feeling good—but since she said she was unwell, I had to respect that. I asked her for details.

“It kind of reminds me of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine,” she said.

Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—a forgotten shrine in our town located at the peak of a small mountain. It was in such rundown shape that you could describe it as a ruin. Kanbaru and I had visited it together, in June, I think.

Right.

Her condition was poor then—the strength had been sapped out of her, as if she'd been poisoned by the air surrounding the shrine. The same as then…

Hm.

What was the exact situation and reason that she felt unwell back then? My mind was a bit cloudy too if I couldn't recall why on the spot.

More than anything, though, I wanted to get as far away as possible from the abandoned cram school, and meet with Miss Gaen as soon as possible. This desire bordered on mild panic, so normally I'd be trying to temper it.

"It really takes me back… You and I kissed for the very first time under that shrine's trees, senpai."

"Okay, you're the one who's forgetting things."

"Huh? Oh, was it the second time? Or the third time?"

"You're assuming there was a first time. Also, when we went there together, we found hacked-up snakes pinned to those trees, all right?"

I remembered now.

That's right, I went there with Kanbaru on a job for the expert Mèmè Oshino, regarding an aberrational phenomenon that had yet to turn into a full-blown aberration. We'd visited the shrine to cleanse the grounds of a place where "bad things" gathered.

Kanbaru felt ill then because of the effect these bad things had on her—but thanks to Shinobu's protection, I was able to complete the

job Oshino had given me without any serious problems.

…I'd been carrying out a request from him then, and now I was carrying out a request from his senior, Miss Izuko Gaen. Though the circumstances themselves only looked similar on a surface level, maybe Kanbaru and I were destined as a pair to do these kinds of things.

But if that was true, I couldn't turn a blind eye to Kanbaru comparing her poor condition to how she felt back then. She wouldn't tell such a lie just to have me piggyback her a little longer, would she?

"That's right, that's right. That was when I first met Sengoku□yes, it was Sengoku whom I first kissed under those trees, with tons of hacked-up snakes pinned to them."

"Your memories aren't just clouded if you're gonna go that far. The word would be altered."

"Which is why some people call me…the conductor of memories."

"What conductor of memories? You're saying you can make your memories play out however you like with the wave of a baton?" The probability that she was just lying to have me piggyback her for a little longer was spiking.

"But if I said it, they might add a kiss scene between me and Sengoku as an illustration once this part finally gets an anime adaptation."

"They're not making one of the final season. Or actually, of you. Of any stories involving you. Just for reference, Kanbaru. I don't really get it, but do you like them? Piggyback rides, I mean?"

"Well, I had an image to uphold as the star of the basketball team. It makes me happy to have a senior openly spoil me like this. I don't think I've ridden on anyone's back since my senior Senjogahara's in middle school."

"…"

I could only imagine how much work Senjogahara must have once put in.

What kind of side stories existed between the Valhalla Duo during their middle school years? In any case, as cool and stately as she could be, Kanbaru was surprisingly good at being spoiled.

On the other hand, I was pretty awful at it.

“Hm,” Kanbaru said, “I’ve started to remember quite a bit as the conductor of memories□did you say we were on the way to meet someone you wanted to introduce me to?”

“Oh… Yeah, that’s what we’re doing. I need to apologize to you about that, though.”

Right.

I’d forgotten to apologize because of how idiotic Kanbaru was being.

Whether it was the armored warrior or the fire, it was clear that my thoughtless invitation had put her life in serious danger.

“Heh. No need to apologize. In fact, I’d rather you didn’t. It’d be a blot on my name if I ever allowed you to bow your head to me, dear senior.”

“I feel like it’s a way bigger blot on your name to have me carrying you on my back… So big that it’d look like a puddle. But no, listen, you might want to go home already, but it might be dangerous if you did. I want you to tag alongside me until we know what’s going on at least.”

“If you also want me to sleep alongside you, I wouldn’t turn you down.”

“Tag, not sleep.”

“Well, that’s not to say that some tag-team action couldn’t be arranged for.”

“No, let’s say exactly that. What are you, one of those heroines-in-heat all over the place in YA novels about twenty years ago?”

“Heroine-in-heat… Talk about a new turn of phrase that gets the heart pounding.”

“Please, let’s not.”

“Actually, it’s literary fiction that’s full of heroines-in-heat.”

“Now isn’t the time for satire.”

I thought—having heard her lampoonery, I thought I should at least present her with the info I had at the moment—and tell her everything I could just as I’d done with Ononoki.

But I wanted to meet with Miss Gaen as soon as possible—not to mention an even more basic problem, namely that I didn’t understand our current situation. I had as close to zero confidence as imaginable when it came to explaining the situation to Kanbaru.

I might as well have known nothing.

I should’ve seen this coming and asked Miss Gaen about the specifics of the job—the circumstances may not have permitted it, but now it felt like I was walking through a maze blindfolded.

“I promise I’ll make it up to you, so please,” I begged, “put up with it for this one night.”

“This one night? Don’t say such depressing things. I’m waiting for you to invite me over each and every night.”

“In that case, you could also wait for me during the day…”

“You know there’s only one thing I’ll ever say to your orders.” Kanbaru’s voice dropped and she whispered, “Bon appétit ♪”

“Shut up! But that was kinda cute?!”

What the hell did I order?!

If she was taking any, my order was for her to stop saying all these things that made me want to just leave her there and walk off. I wasn't supposed to be climbing a mountain to ditch a granny like in feudal times.

"I do at least want to ask you where we're heading, though. Haven't we gone a little far if we're just trying to escape the fire? Don't we need to call the authorities?"

A rather mature suggestion, coming from someone who needed to have the authorities called on her. "It's fine. The fire is already out, and there weren't any victims, either… We're heading toward that meeting spot I mentioned. Um…maybe you know the place?" Back at the old cram school, there must be a commotion by now□actually, no, it was away from any homes, in an obscure area, and had burned down in the blink of an eye. Maybe nobody had contacted the authorities… "It's called Rohaku Park."

"Rohaku Park?"

"Or maybe it's Namishiro Park."

I still didn't know the correct reading□but in any case, it was one of the larger parks in town. I'd met Mayoi Hachikuji for the first time there, and come to think of it, it was also where Hitagi Senjogahara had told me that she had feelings for me.

In that sense, I didn't really want to make it a place to meet and talk about work, but I had no choice. Miss Gaen had chosen the spot. Speaking of her, since she knew everything, did she also know the correct reading?

"Rohaku Park… Namishiro Park… Hm. Does it have a basketball court?"

"No, I'm pretty sure it doesn't."

"Then I don't know it."

"Is that really your standard for parks? Oh, but maybe you've just forgotten? This neighborhood should have been Senjogahara's turf back in middle school."

Turf might not be the right term, but that's how she'd described it—in any case, it seemed like there might be a side story from the Valhalla Duo days when the two played in the park.

I'm ignorant on the subject of whether middle school girls play in parks, but Karen Araragi, my little sister, does at least. She gets on the swings and builds up enough speed to send her shoes flying far, far away.

…I'm concerned about my little sister's future.

"Hmm, then maybe I'll remember once I see it. Senjogahara-senpai's old home—heheh."

Kanbaru let out a soft chuckle behind me.

Depending on how you interpreted this, she was feeling warm and fuzzy, having recalled a time when she was closer to Senjogahara than she was now. I didn't know much about Senjogahara's old home, and wanted to learn more.

"She must have invited you over," I said.

"Yeah. She did. To a cozy li'l mansion."

"…"

God, what a rude junior.

Then again, the Japanese estate Kanbaru lived in went beyond being a mansion. Maybe her upbringing solidified her personality into what it was now.

"No, my senior. I lived a pretty impoverished life as a young child. My parents eloped, after all. We were in real-deal poverty."

"That doesn't land as hard when you sound so cheerful about it…"

What a life of peaks and valleys.

I assumed this also lay at the root of Suruga Kanbaru's personality—her parents' elopement.

The Kanbarus' only son married the Gaens' eldest daughter without their families' blessing—was that how the story went? And this daughter was Miss Gaen's older sister…

Suruga Kanbaru's parents then died in a traffic accident, leaving her all on her own, which is where the Kanbarus took her in.

"Whatever the case, Araragi-senpai, I'm all set. We're heading to that park now, right? And this person you want me to meet is there?"

"Well, yeah."

To be honest, at this point, I didn't really want Kanbaru to meet her—considering the rift between the Kanbaru and Gaen families, and given our current situation.

I, personally, did want to meet up with Miss Gaen—and even more with Shinobu. We'd constantly been together for a while, so I felt uneasy being cut off from her. Take even the abandoned cram school just now, if Shinobu had been there—no, it was probably better that she wasn't… Either way, I had to see Miss Gaen to restore my link with Shinobu.

"But in that case," Kanbaru said. "Aren't we going in the total opposite direction?"

008

The opposite direction.

The words stopped me in my tracks—Kanbaru might not have known the park's name, but as we discussed earlier, she at least had some familiarity with the area. Given that they went to the same middle school, Kanbaru's home was geographically close to it, anyway.

That must have been why she could tell if we were going in the right direction—had I parted ways with her at the abandoned cram school, now the burned-out ruins, I probably wouldn't have noticed until later. Maybe not until dawn, in the worst case.

The fact that I was lost—

"Huh…what? But…"

—puzzled me.

True, my one and only concern at first was getting away from the scene of the fire. I wasn't particularly trying to head toward the park—but I thought I'd course-corrected once we were far enough away.

Straying a bit was to be expected, but…it'd been a while since I corrected course.

Speaking of turfs, the area around the park certainly wasn't mine, nor was it a place I frequented. Still, it stood out in my memories—and not only did it have a strong link to my memories, my fate was connected to it.

Was it really okay for Koyomi Araragi to get lost on his way there?

"Maybe you had a hard time navigating there on foot because

you're always going around on your bike? I was seriously starting to wonder where you were trying to take me."

"Oh…"

"Hold on a second, I thought, there aren't any popular date spots in that direction."

"I have zero reason to take you to a popular date spot."

Well, if she was going to say I got lost because I always rode a bike, I didn't have a counterargument—of the two bikes I owned, one was destroyed by Kanbaru in May, and the other I'd lost just a few days ago. I'd be living a pedestrian life for some time, so this wouldn't do.

"I guess we'll turn around and figure out the best route… Sorry, Kanbaru. I feel bad for making us late."

"Oh, it's nothing serious. I'll leave it up to you. Do as you see fit."

"…"

I was glad that she was being generous, but she sounded so arrogant when she was trying to be humble. I wondered how she spoke to her teachers.

She acted like she expected others to do things for her—or maybe I should say to carry her through life, given her current perch.

In any case, as a senior who'd been entrusted with the reins, I'd do everything I could to turn around, change course, clear my name, and regain my honor.

My cell phone didn't have any map or navigational features (maybe it did, but I didn't know how to use them), so we'd march along checking whatever road signs and street maps we found. I may have wasted some time by failing to do so until now, but we wouldn't get lost again, we'd hurry and make up for it, I thought—but.

No.

“Hm?”

Ononoki’s words came to mind—those cutting words.

You think you can always make up for it, don’t you?

Even if I mess up.

An hour later… Naturally, an hour spent chatting about all kinds of stupid things with Kanbaru—a conversation I have no choice but to edit out whole…

I found myself in a completely unfamiliar location—not that we’d wandered into a jungle or a wasteland, it still had to be the town we lived in, but you could call it bizarre.

You could call it inexplicable—the degree to which we were lost.

“Do you have a bad sense of direction?” asked Kanbaru. “Or are you taking me on the scenic route because you want to spend as much time with me as possible?”

“I’d never go about it in that inconvenient of a way…”

My stamina wouldn’t last.

I didn’t think I could keep walking around like this for much longer. I did have an entire person on my back—it was past midnight at this point, too.

The date had changed.

August twenty-fourth.

Four days since the end of summer break. Was I ever going back to school? Of course, when I thought about the scolding from Senjogahara and Hanekawa that awaited me over my unexcused absences, I wasn’t eager to go even if I could.

That said, it wasn’t as if I could tell them what was up. I’d gotten Kanbaru mixed up in this already. How could I allow myself to add Senjogahara and Hanekawa to the mix?

Talking with Kanbaru was fun enough that the fact nearly slipped my mind, but we were knee-deep in a crisis—still, lost?

What was I doing? How could I so carelessly take the wrong streets in this emergency?

It was such an unbecoming mistake, idyllic in a way, and it aggravated me—but it was none other than Suruga Kanbaru who managed to calm me down.

“Now that you mention it, didn’t you say something about maybe, or maybe not, or maybe getting more lost than not before? You know, with Hachikuji?”

“Hm? Oh.”

I didn’t recall ever saying getting more lost than not, but everything fell into place when I heard those words—they should have sooner.

Right. That’s what it was.

This was the second time I was experiencing this phenomenon.

Three months ago.

In May, on Mother’s Day, I, along with Mayoi Hachikuji and Hitagi Senjogahara—got lost.

The Lost Cow.

That was the name—of the aberration.

“An aberration that makes people lose their way—hm. But why would the Lost Cow show up now…”

No, hold on. Don’t jump so quickly to conclusions—it made sense that I wanted a logical explanation for getting lost at this precise and extremely inconvenient moment, but there was a far more likely possibility. I’d simply lost track of where I was going because I felt shaken.

The Lost Cow was gone by now.

That day, Mèmè Oshino resolved it for us.

The aberration that had been making people lose their way in this town for eleven years would never lead another on these streets astray I should know that better than anyone.

I keenly felt it more than anyone.

So it couldn't be right Kanbaru's point was nothing more than a irrelevant memory.

Still, I couldn't help but recall it.

The armored warrior's message as it howled with laughter in the fire.

Ye too, do not dally and make thy way home at once!

That's what it said.

No, strictly speaking, the "message" came later which is why I hadn't paid attention to the preceding bit, assuming it was just a setup…but come to think of it, wasn't it odd?

Why would it warn me about my trip home, in that situation? Even if those flames were irregular and not caused by the warrior, why would someone who'd been choking me say that?

The thing wasn't some principal warning the student body that they represented their school while in public if there was any hidden meaning to the statement, those words it pronounced.

If it had an opposite meaning.

"…"

Hm?

Wait, no… Wouldn't that be a pretty lame thing for the armored warrior to do?

It would contradict its dynamic image so far its boldness as a

phenomenon, if that's the right term. It revived itself despite shattering to pieces, withstood all our attacks, absorbed our energy, stole my voice—then turned to mist and disappeared.

Roaring with laughter.

It'd be a mean-spirited prank, not even bullying. Would something like that really do this to us? If that armored warrior was the opponent I thought it was—that went doubly so.

It didn't line up at all with my image of a heroic warrior.

Even if it was responsible for us being lost, what could its goal be? What good would it do to make Kanbaru and me lose our way—and not know where we were? Or did it have some sort of deeper plot in mind that the likes of me could never hope to fathom? Assuming the armor had a mind, of course—

"Kanbaru. I'm putting you down for a second."

"You're going to insult me?"

"On the ground," I said, making us both sound like idiots, as I got Kanbaru off my back at last—even she wasn't going to cling to me in resistance this time.

Maybe it was thanks to the for a second, promising her a next time, than Kanbaru understanding the gravity of the situation—but in any case, she stretched, jumped, and otherwise checked her physical condition now that she stood on solid ground with both feet. It seemed that being carried on my back involved a bit of work on her part as well.

It's not easy being good at being spoiled.

Meanwhile, I took out my cell phone.

It lacked both map apps and navigation features, so taking it out now was faint-hearted, an act of giving up early.

Giving up very early.

But whether you want to call me faint-hearted or lacking in self-reliance, my only choice seemed to be to call Miss Gaen.

She'd given me her phone number when we parted ways.

I'd also sought help in May when a snail led me astray, but it ended up being a pretty roundabout affair because I was trying to contact Oshino then, someone without any communication devices. This time, though, I was getting in touch with Miss Gaen, who walked around with five of them. The act of contacting her itself would be easy.

At the same time, I found myself in my troublesome situation precisely because I needed to pay her back for helping me. Contacting her was easy, but asking her for help wasn't. That's why I hadn't tried until now, but I needed to nip this situation in the bud.

Of course, it was already too late for Koyomi Araragi, if you believed Ononoki…

"What's this, my senior? Sending a goodnight text message to Senjogahara-senpai, are you? What a couple of fools in love you are."

"You're the only fool here. Hey, Kanbaru…" I began, but decided not to finish.

It was a small detail, but the armored warrior had said make thy way home at once, seeming to refer only to my home, not our homes—if it was causing us to stray, maybe its effect was limited to me.

In other words, if Kanbaru and I moved separately, at least she might be able to escape this strange situation that felt like being locked inside of being lost—the thought almost got me to encourage her to go ahead, but I couldn't see any way my junior would agree.

Her heart was so astonishingly loyal to me that she wouldn't even leave me behind in a burning building to save herself. I couldn't imagine her leaving my side to act on her own just because we got

lost on the road.

Hmm.

Maybe I shouldn't say this, but loyalty taken too far doesn't seem that different from dependence… Senjogahara sometimes complained about my relationship with Kanbaru, and now I felt like I understood why.

The problem here, though, was that Suruga Kanbaru possessed a strength of character generally greater than mine or Senjogahara's.

"Hm? What's wrong, Araragi-senpai?"

"Oh, it's nothing… Could you be quiet for a second? I'm about to make a call."

"Fine with me. I'll do anything for you, no matter how unreasonable."

"Um, this is one of the few times I feel like I'm not making an unreasonable request…"

But to be fair, Kanbaru spent pretty much every waking moment talking, so perhaps asking her to shut up was a big deal.

"Phew…"

I calmed my breathing to refresh my mind, summoned up my courage, and selected Izuko Gaen's name from my phone's address book.

Just as I thought.

Before the phone could finish ringing a single time.

"Hey there, Koyomin□I'd been waiting, and I could barely wait anymore. I thought it was about time you called."

A voice.

From the other side□came a reply.

Brimming with boundless cheer, like it wasn't the middle of the night.

Nothing about the voice sounded serious, which made me think: Yeah, I guess she'd be Kanbaru's aunt.

009

Izuko Gaen.

The lady who knows everything.

Senior to Mèmè Oshino, Yozuru Kagenui, and Deishu Kaiki, as well as something like the big boss when it comes to aberrations—I'd heard of her existence here and there, but only met her for the first time a few days ago.

She was mature but not by any means old, wearing an outfit that made her seem younger than her real age. I never would have imagined her to be Oshino's senior. I suppose you could describe her as oddly or overly familiar; her chumminess was something she had in common with Kanbaru, a natural communicator.

At the same time, there was a clear line between her niece's sociable and engaging personality and her own. At the risk of being misunderstood, I'd say she wasn't the type I really wanted to befriend or get too involved with. In that sense, she definitely was a kind of senior figure to Oshino, Kagenui, and Kaiki…

I should've been celebrating my good fortune, having managed to contact the outside world with a cell phone amidst this new aberrational phenomenon—but I felt so strongly about her that part of me wished my phone had ended up being jammed and out of service in the middle of town.

While the location of our meeting had been decided, we hadn't set a specific hour—since I didn't know how long I'd need to talk (chat) with Kanbaru.

Miss Gaen shouldn't have been able to figure out when we'd arrive at the park, let alone whether I'd call her—but she seemed totally unflapped when she picked up.

As if she'd been waiting, like she said.

"C'mon, Koyomin. Don't talk about me like I've got superpowers or something—I'm no big deal. Yotsugi gave me a progress report on the details, that's all. That, and I assumed you must have a phone with you."

"…"

"Seems like you've been through a lot—but I'm glad you're okay."

"Okay? I'm not sure if I could say that."

I somehow resisted the urge to complain—ranting at Miss Gaen wouldn't do me any good.

Ononoki was right, even she couldn't have predicted what happened back there… And how could I raise my voice at someone I was about to ask for advice?

As a matter of courtesy, of course, but also in terms of simple self-interest.

"You're okay," Miss Gaen said, her tone as assertive as ever. "People are okay so long as they're alive—and isn't it great? You're not dead. No, I'm being serious—if I'd let you get yourself killed, even I wouldn't be able to hold my head up to Mèmè with a smile on my face."

"…"

Something about her seemed so frivolous. Every little thing she said.

So she always smiled around him? Insincerely or something? Then again, her frivolity did make this easier for me…

"And? What's going on now? Go ahead, you can tell your friend Miss Gaen all about it."

"Well…"

“Is it a crab? A snail? A monkey? A snake? A cat?”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t help but be disoriented at her attempt to anticipate what I was about to say—it felt like getting stabbed in the back right as I called to ask her for help.

A snail—a lost cow.

“Wh-What do you know?”

“I know everything.”

As you know, she reminded me.

I went silent—I wouldn’t have been able to hold the words back otherwise. Not complaints this time, but doubts.

What I’d started to doubt was Ononoki’s claim that the current turn of events was far from what Miss Gaen could have predicted. Whatever report Ononoki might have given, how could Miss Gaen know that we were now lost—lost as though we’d been led astray on these streets by a lost cow—when she should be in a distant park?

But perhaps she could glean something even from my silence.

“Ahaha,” she laughed. “C’mon, it’s just a joke—what’re you acting all serious for, Koyomin? It’s all a trick to make myself seem more impressive. If I give five examples, one of them would have to be right. It’s a dirty trick that adults pull.”

“…”

“So, which is it? Wouldn’t you please tell your friend Miss Gaen, she doesn’t have the first clue—though my personal guess would be the snail.”

She had it right after all.

Her explanation that one of her five examples had to be right did have some merit to it, but her afterthought ruined her own

argument. Did she want to clear herself of any doubts, or only deepen them?

The simple answer would be that she was just toying around with me—but that's not to say it felt pleasant to be toyed around with.

"Oh, please. I just thought that if you were in a place to call for help, it must be the snail—it's called reasoning. So, what's the matter?"

"You're exactly right… Yes. Kanbaru and I are together—and we were heading toward the park to meet you, but we've spent over an hour and—"

"Hahaha," Miss Gaen laughed again.

Just like earlier, it felt like the gravity of my situation wasn't getting across at all.

"I was thinking of all the people it could be—but it looks like it's the smallest one of the bunch."

"…?"

Miss Gaen's inexplicable statement left me at a loss for words, but it did seem as though one of her points of concern had been addressed. Her already-clear voice grew even brighter.

"Koyomin," she said. "That to me is great news, if anything—and it just might be for you, too. Yes, how auspicious. I almost feel like getting a cake ready for you with candles and all."

"A cake…"

"That's a joke, don't worry about it. Anyway, hurry up. I'm starting to want to hear the details about this face-to-face. To be honest, I thought we might be in a little bit of trouble when I got that report from Yotsugi, but your intel is like a shining beam of hope."

"N-No, like I was saying, the issue is that we're having trouble hurrying up—I think we're going to be lost out here forever if we don't do something, which is why I was hoping to get some advice

from you□”

“There’s no need for me to give you advice. That’s nothing more than a little bit of meddling□if you can’t overcome a hassle like that on your own, then we’ve got a problem.”

Her tone was neither cold nor harsh, but the words were a clear rejection□a clear rejection in a clear tone.

A problem? Sure, we had a problem. But it was she who dragged us into this situation.

“Oh, no, Koyomin. That’s exactly why□you already know what it means to ask me for advice, don’t you? You’re in this predicament because you got yourself saved by me□the longer you want this endless cycle of assistance to continue, the worse of a light you paint yourself in. Find yourself a good distance from me. Fortunately, Koyomin, this isn’t your first time getting lost. So why don’t you follow Mèmè’s principle and go and get saved on your own?”

Wait, no□Miss Gaen paused. Then continued insinuatingly:

“I guess you’re not alone. You have your reliable junior there with you, don’t you? Why not just rely on her?”

“J-Just rely on her?”

On Kanbaru?

When I’d already gotten her this involved?

This went beyond the armored warrior. I could look at everything that happened to me starting on the last day of summer break, and she still had nothing to do with any of it whatsoever. There wasn’t a single reason for her to be lost on the street with me□and Miss Gaen wanted me to rely even more on Kanbaru, a complete bystander?

“Wh-Who exactly do you think Kanbaru is? Kanbaru is□”

“Suruga Kanbaru is the daughter of my sister,” Miss Gaen replied

cheerfully. “It’d be a waste to allow her talents to remain slumbering.”

010

I'd actually gotten a call through, only for her to hang up on me□I considered calling back, but there didn't seem to be much point in that. I doubted she'd go so far as to ignore me, but she'd probably give me the same answer□and she surely wouldn't give us any details about this job that I'd apparently shined a beam of hope or whatever on.

I mean, of course I'd have preferred to discuss it face-to-face too… Anyway, I shut my phone and turned to Kanbaru.

Her stretching, or possibly her warming up, had turned into some yoga-like pose during the time I'd turned away from her. It left me speechless. I never knew the human body could stretch to those kinds of angles.

"Oh, finish your call?"

It seemed she hadn't listened to our conversation, out of politeness□though it could also have been a lack of interest. When something didn't interest Kanbaru, she really wasn't interested.

"That expression, too. I can tell you have a task for your slave."

"I don't own any slaves…"

"Then there's no need for my opinion? How encouraging."

"Wait, there is□"

Miss Gaen hadn't given me any advice.

However, if you interpreted her words favorably, Kanbaru held the key to escaping this crisis (or at least, this mysterious situation where we were lost). Even if I couldn't stop us from going in circles, Kanbaru could□well, true.

To repeat myself, it isn't as if Miss Gaen wanted me to introduce Kanbaru to her because she had a particular interest in meeting her niece after their many years apart. She'd gotten Kanbaru mixed up in exchange for helping us because her niece's arm was required to complete a job.

When Miss Gaen mentioned Kanbaru's arm, I'd taken her words at face value. In other words, she needed Kanbaru's left arm, or her monster's paw—but if you took it less literally, as a helping hand from Kanbaru, then relying on her to deal with an aberrational phenomenon made sense.

After all, she hadn't even hesitated to stand up against the phenomenon that was the armored warrior—the question was whether that showed her recklessness or her caliber.

Whatever the case, there was no longer any point in me keeping up appearances as her senior. I needed to look at Kanbaru as neither my junior nor my slave but as my partner and work with her to move forward.

"—I do need it. If you have any opinions, Kanbaru, I'd like them."

"Ohh? Is that all you'd like from me? Opinions?" Kanbaru smirked. "I wouldn't mind showing you my boobs if you so desire."

"I don't desire so. Why are you saying that with a smirk on your face? I know it's late at night, but could you stop it with this after-dark mood?"

"That's not it. I had a feeling tonight would be a late one from the moment I got that invitation from you. I made sure to get a lot of sleep at school today."

"So you aren't running on fumes, this is you on a full tank?"

That would be tough on me in its own way… But in any case.

I changed the subject and asked Kanbaru if she had any good ideas for beating this situation.

"You do hear it said that the best thing to do when you get lost is to

stop moving," Kanbaru said, exiting her yoga pose to walk behind me. I thought the effect she was going for was a detective walking in circles, but she stopped once she got behind me and tried to jump onto my back.

I dodged her.

"Huh? Why'd you move?"

"Why are you acting like piggyback is the new normal?"

"Well, it looked like you finished your call."

"Carrying on my back someone who's capable of leaping onto it? Even if I hypothetically did agree, can we at least figure out what we're doing first? You don't have a reserved seat on my back, okay?"

"Right. It's coach class." Kanbaru gave up on my back with those possibly fighting words before continuing, "The rule about staying put doesn't necessarily hold if you have a destination… I'm going to ask this just to make sure there aren't any misunderstandings here, but is it okay for me to assume that this is similar to the experience you had of being lost before? You aren't just lost, right? This is some kind of aberrational phenomenon."

"Yeah…that's what I think." I didn't have proof yet, but it seemed like we could say that given Miss Gaen's reaction. "That said, I don't think it's the exact same as my past experience… I guess you could say the details are different?"

"Hmm. Out of curiosity, how did you handle the situation in May?"

"Umm…"

For someone preparing to take college entrance exams, I had very little confidence in my memory. The answer didn't come to me on the spot, but eventually I remembered how. The only problem was that we couldn't use the method this time around.

For a number of reasons, but the biggest being: having to be on Senjogahara's level at the very least when it comes to making use of

a cell phone (a map app). Both Kanbaru and I were hopeless when it came to digital devices—unlike me, Kanbaru did now have a smartphone (she likes new things), but that didn't matter unless she was proficient in its use.

I explained to Kanbaru the way I dealt with the Lost Cow, thinking it might come in handy.

She heard me out, a grave expression on her face.

"Hmm," she looked to the side.

Could she have thought of something? No, that would be far too much to expect from her this early. Miss Gaen may have built her up in my mind, but at the end of the day, Kanbaru was a basketball player, not an expert on aberrations.

Regardless of who her mother or relatives were…

Regardless of her left arm.

Just as I decided that I, with my greater experience regarding aberrational phenomena, needed to take the lead in coming up with a solution and opened my mouth—

"My senior Araragi," she said. "Have you heard this story before?"

Still looking to the side.

"You know those bicycles that the police ride? It's about those."

"Umm…no, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't heard any interesting stories about police bicycles."

"They don't have locks on them."

"What? Really? Not on either of the wheels?"

"Not one or the other. They're kept unlocked so that they can go on the move as soon as something happens—and it's possible because there's no need to lock them. No one would dare steal a police bicycle."

“Huh…”

I didn’t know.

But now that she mentioned it, it made perfect sense.

What a neat story—but a moment after I found myself convinced…

“Of course, that’s just a lie,” Kanbaru continued.

“A lie?! So it really is just a neat story?!”

“Of course it’s a lie. Think of how bad it’d be if someone stole a police bicycle and used it for something bad. Those bikes need to be protected more than anything.”

“…”

I was the one who’d been conned, so why did it feel like I was being scolded? What a fine lie, though. If it were about police cars or motorcycles, no one would believe it.

“Okay, but why bring that up now? You’re not going to suggest that we find a police station and ask for directions, are you?”

“Oh, no. Something completely unrelated just popped into my mind. I thought I wouldn’t forget it if I went ahead and told you about it.”

“Don’t use me as your personal scratchpad!”

Nor be thinking of completely unrelated things—we were just lost, but it was also an emergency!

“Sorry, sorry,” Kanbaru casually apologized, her smile betraying no signs of guilt whatsoever. “I was bored because I came up with an easy way to claw our way out of this fix.”

“Bored or not—wait, what? A way to claw our way out?”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

Then Kanbaru moved—to an electric pole.

One nearby, the kind you found anywhere in town—then she reached a hand out to it. No, not just a hand—all four of her limbs.

Truly looking like a monkey as she made use of her arms and legs to glide up the pole.

“You know, this isn’t an electric pole. It’s a telephone pole.”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“It does. I could get electrocuted if it was an electric pole.”

Kanbaru climbed all the way to the top of the electric, sorry, telephone pole like it was something you might find in a playground, all while talking (which is to say with ease)—then climbed down just as quickly after looking around.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Once complete, the purpose of these actions was clear as day—she must have gotten a look at the lay of the land from her high vantage point up at the top of the pole. That, or perhaps she’d even seen the park we were trying to get to—in either case, a full-grown high schooler climbing a telephone pole was bizarre enough of an act to have the police called on you. It was dangerous whether or not there was any risk of being electrocuted.

You only look cool climbing high and scowling down on the landscape below if it’s an anime.

“Okay, I got it. This way.”

Having landed, Kanbaru pointed in the direction she seemed to have just confirmed.

“I don’t know where the park is, but if it’s near where Senjogahara-senpai’s home used to be, my nose should be able to point me most of the way there—let’s go.”

“Not your eyes but your nose… And can we really?”

While I hadn’t gotten the idea to climb a telephone pole, confirming

the direction we needed to travel in was no different from using road signs and residential maps—which hadn't kept us from getting lost. No matter how accurate maps or GPS might be, we'd never reach our destination if our basic sense of direction was off—but.

Just as I thought to inform Kanbaru of this fact that went without saying, she was already doing something else—there was no need to scramble up anything this time around.

All she needed was a small running start and a leap to jump onto the concrete block wall behind the pole—and once there, she turned to offer me her hand.

"Here, senpai."

"Wh-What are you, a ninja?"

How could anyone be so agile?

Okay, I knew quite well just how agile Kanbaru could be—the question was why she'd jumped on top of a wall.

And why she was offering me a hand.

Did she want me to climb up there, or what?

"Hm? Well, you said this Lost Cow aberration leads people on the street astray, right?"

Kanbaru spoke as though she was giving me a simple, unshakable answer, and the look on her face also said that it was obvious.

"All we have to do in that case is not walk on the street."

011

Taking the streets means taking the wrong streets.

Take not a street but a path less traveled—Kanbaru's proposal could be made to sound like some old-fashioned saying if you worded it the right way, but it wasn't as simple as that.

Really, I'd have felt more worried if we made our way through the crisis with what seemed like the answer to a trick question. I nearly breathed a sigh of relief when it didn't go well—but to cut to the chase, we did reach the park where we'd agreed to meet Miss Gaen.

It only took more time than we expected—no, I should be honest and say that I slowed Kanbaru down. I didn't have the balance needed to walk atop a concrete wall. Though my lovable little sister, Mlle. Karen Araragi, possessed the unique ability to travel any path upside-down on her hands, more fortunately than unfortunately, I did not—especially now that I was back to default settings, having lost my vampiric skills. In the end, Kanbaru had to help me along, not only in getting up to the wall but all the way, as I staggered and trembled like I was on a balance beam.

I had to walk while a younger girl led me by the hand.

I didn't have a shred of my dignity as a senior left.

My lack of dignity was boundless.

Even apart from that, it's not as if privately owned walls stretch on forever. We couldn't expect them to go in a straight line to the park in question.

Ononoki's master, the violent onmyoji known as Yozuru Kagenui, had an odd rule of never walking on the ground, moving by hopping from one wall or mailbox or fence or, in fact, electric pole to the next, and the two of us now found ourselves in a similar

situation. Well, Miss Kagenui would laugh if she heard me call our situations similar, given how many times I fell to the ground.

We were forcing it, or powering through, via a method that was a far cry from the neat and tidy plan once proposed by Oshino and executed by Senjogahara—but not walking on the street did prove to be a valid way of escaping this labyrinth. It did feel like we were cheating, as if we'd completed a two-dimensional maze by going along its lines instead of the white space between them, but as someone who hadn't come up with a solution back in May or now, all I could really do was admire Kanbaru. Not to mention, the plan sounded fairly viable if you likened it to avoiding the center of a Shinto shrine's main path, a lane reserved for the gods.

Of course, we could only do this because it was the middle of the night. There's no way we could have used the method back in May, this was textbook suspicious behavior… Hachikuji was one thing, but I could harness the full powers of my imagination and still fail to picture Senjogahara walking atop a concrete wall.

To go into more detail, it seemed that gutters and empty lots didn't count as streets, just as the top of walls didn't. Even crossing a road was fine, as long as you didn't go down it. Learning these lessons, which would probably never be of use again, the two of us arrived at the park at last at around three in the morning.

Frankly, I wasn't sure if Kanbaru had done the kind of work that Miss Gaen had in mind, but it certainly wouldn't have worked without my junior's athleticism, even if we didn't need to be quite at Miss Kagenui's level—I fell again and again, in fact. But in the end, we did arrive at our destination without any help from the woman waiting there for us.

Naturally, I wasn't entirely happy about it.

No, not because I hurt my arm falling from the wall or anything (I got off with just a few scratches)—there were two separate reasons.

First, while we'd escaped our nonsensical situation thanks to Kanbaru, we never figured out exactly why we'd gotten lost in the first place—we'd pulled through, but nothing more. If it was the

doing of that armored warrior, we had no idea why it had done such a thing. Its very identity and goals were still unclear to us… and we'd only gotten out of the way of a ball thrown in our direction. It's not as if we'd caught it or analyzed it. Yes, we solved it as a simple problem, but we barely touched it as a complex one—so I couldn't be just glad.

But the second reason I couldn't be was far more vital. Without it, I wouldn't be so greedy as to complain about the first, as though all I wanted was to analyze the situation, in spite of us being amateurs.

In other words—as long as a professional could enlighten us…

"…"

She wasn't there.

The all-important professional, Izuko Gaen, wasn't at the park where we'd promised to meet.

"Hm?"

Had she left because we'd taken forever? Did she just decide to go home? But where would she go home to? She was hardly rustic, and was a lady too—it's not as if she'd sleep rough like Oshino… But there weren't any hotels around here. Did she go to the town over?

There was of course a fairly good chance that she'd convinced a family in the area to let her stay the night, given her friendly demeanor…

"Hold on, no way," I fumed. "Am I really having the ladder pulled out from under me here?"

I looked over at Kanbaru to find her with burning eyes. Uh oh, Kanbaru's "senpai tricked me to take me to an empty park in the middle of the night" theory was starting to look realistic.

Miss Gaen needed to be here, for the sake of my honor…but a glance around the area showed it to be deserted.

No, stop. Calm down.

It did take time for us to get here, but it was a mere three hours since my earlier call□she wouldn't get impatient and leave over that. I didn't see Miss Gaen as someone that restless. Sure, I couldn't expect her to wait until the cows came home, but no, she was the type to wait and see things through.

She had to be hiding somewhere just to scare us. That was the kind of playful lady she was (, I hoped).

"My senior, normally people would just go home if you made them wait for three hours in the middle of the night."

"A fair point, but it's not as if we were coming here to meet her on a play date…"

It would be quite the late-night romp. A fisherman might even call this hour of the day the morning.

"Hmm…what kind of person could we be trying to meet? Oh, it's okay, don't tell me. My loyalty is being tested here."

"It's not, okay? If anything, what could I do to make you start doubting me a little more?"

One wrong turn and you'd be a stalker, I began to say before realizing that she'd been exactly that when she first appeared.

The girl rode a fine line in a whole lot of ways…

Anyhow, while I'd wanted Miss Gaen to explain the situation, if she wasn't here, maybe I needed to go ahead and tell Kanbaru that it was her aunt that we were trying to see□or rather, given this outcome, if Miss Gaen wasn't going to protect Kanbaru, I needed to see my junior home as I'd originally planned.

Ugh, as unreliable as you'd expect Oshino's senior to be, I thought, dumbfounded, only to arrive at another possibility.

Right.

It's not as if I had a monopoly on getting wrapped up in aberrational phenomena□could Miss Gaen have been visited by

some sort of phenomenon, just as I'd gotten lost on the streets, leading to her absence?

If the phrase wrapped up sounds paranoid, so be it. Unlike Kanbaru and me, who'd been summoned as helpers, Miss Gaen was in town this time as part of her day job, her profession as an expert. In that sense, the probability that she'd encounter an aberration was higher for her than it was for us.

And just because she's an expert doesn't mean she can't be the victim of aberrations. It's not as if she can skate straight through every situation, no matter how serious, and come out unharmed□even Oshino was in awful shape after taking on Black Hanekawa, right?

True, I couldn't lump in Miss Gaen, the big boss, with Oshino. But what if, while we were playing walk the balance beam on top of some walls and fences, Miss Gaen had gotten attacked in this park by that armored warrior, who forced her to retreat to a location where she now awaited my help?

The hypothetical lost all traces of reality around the time I got to the where she now awaited my help bit, but even apart from that, she was someone you had to worry so little about. The thought of something happening to her seemed so improbable, I might as well worry about a meteor falling from the sky and hitting her square in the head.

Still, having envisioned this, I couldn't turn around and go home just because I couldn't find her at first glance.

"Kanbaru. I want you to do something for me."

"Bon appétit ♪"

"No, not that. I know it might be pointless, but I want us to split up and search every inch of the park."

"Oh. You're serious about your theory where this person waiting for us is hiding and trying to surprise us?"

"No."

“The hide-and-seek theory, then.”

“Don’t put forward any new theories. Look for anyone who might have collapsed in the shade or a bush, I want to check for that—if you find something, just holler.”

“Okay. If I find something, I scream.”

“Don’t scream. You’ll get me arrested.”

“Well, you’ve captured my interest.”

With that reply, mildly clever for being on the spur, Kanbaru ran off—it seemed she’d made a full recovery from her erstwhile malaise. I of course wasn’t going to make my junior do all the work, and facing in the opposite direction—

“My senior! I found her!”

“…”

Was she trying to keep me from doing any of the work, or what?

I wasn’t getting any chances at all to show off.

In fact, Kanbaru had managed to sweep three quarters of the park before I could take a single step—she was to the front of me.

I looked at her despondently, only to find a swing. By which Kanbaru stood.

Hm?

Uh… For as loud as she called to me, it didn’t seem that Miss Gaen or anyone else was with her.

“No, no. See? Look closely,” Kanbaru said as she pointed—at the ground.

More precisely, just under the swing—and of all things, there lay a person, face-up.

Sound asleep right under a swing.

The reason I didn't notice this figure playing with a swing in the most dangerous way on earth until Kanbaru pointed her finger was that it was far smaller than the one I was looking for—because it was about half of Miss Gaen's size, no, even smaller.

Tiny might be more apt than small—not that I'm making excuses.

I ought to be ashamed that I didn't notice at once. I should have noticed the golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl sooner than anyone, prior to all.

"Shi-Shinobu!"

"Zzz."

Asleep. Can you believe it?

In any case, here in the park where we were supposed to meet up with Miss Gaen, I was finally reunited with the former vampire whose link to me had been severed due to a mishap—my soulmate, Shinobu Oshino.

012

“Ah—so it’s ye. How long it took. Thou hast grown quite haughty, I see, forcing me to stay wide awake, waiting here all night.”

“You were sound asleep. What happened to you being nocturnal?”

“My sleep schedule’s been turned around.”

“If a vampire gets her sleep schedule turned around, that just means sleeping when a regular, healthy person does.”

“Mnrrrgh.”

Shinobu got up as she rubbed her eyes—but as she did, she bonked the top of her head against the swing. She fell back down with a “Gah!”

Just look at how cute she is…

While Kanbaru watched the little girl with a warm smile (now that I think about it, this would have been her first time meeting a speaking Shinobu), I of course had to do more.

We parted ways not knowing if we’d ever see the other alive again, so you could call this an emotional reunion—but the timing of it just wasn’t right. It felt like getting a slow curve when you’re expecting a fastball.

Like I might end up watching it go past me.

Whatever the case, I first needed to ask Shinobu why she was here—and I would also need to explain to her what had happened to me since our parting. I moved the swing to the side and helped Shinobu get up.

“Hey, Shinobu… Why are you here?”

“I know, I know—calm thyself, my master. I’ll explain all in…zzz…”

“It looks to me the only thing you’re interested in doing is sleeping… Hm?”

That’s when I noticed—only once I’d taken her hand and approached her. Here and there on Shinobu’s translucently white skin were what looked like scratch wounds.

Scratch wounds?

Wounds?

Don’t tell me it’s from playing on the swings, I thought, given her position and supine pose (she would seriously be getting lectured if it was)—but no, you didn’t get scratches like hers from playing on a swing.

In that case, what could it be? The marks almost made it look like she’d been through a small skirmish before I arrived at the park. In that case, was she sleeping despite it being the middle of the night to restore her energy after a battle?

“Kakak!”

Shinobu laughed—then faced Kanbaru.

A pretty intrepid laugh, given that her entire body was covered in scratches.

Seeing her made me think. Maybe we’d remained connected in a sense despite our link being cut, considering the way I’d been subject to countless blows and scrapes.

“So—a monkey. Hmph. What a handful that was.”

“…?”

I tilted my head in confusion at the words that accompanied her laugh—okay, well, Shinobu may have been living at the abandoned cram school with Oshino and not in my shadow when that stuff happened with Kanbaru’s left hand, but I did draw on her strength.

It still didn't explain why Shinobu herself described Kanbaru as a "handful," though…

"Heh. Yeah, this kitty really is a lot to handle," Kanbaru returned, her words coming from some strange fantasy unknown to me□please, Kanbaru, just stay quiet for a while. I'm sorry, but you're only going to make things harder to deal with.

What was she going to do if Shinobu snapped at being calling a kitty? She knew that this little girl was also a vampire, right?

But.

"A cat, eh…"

Shinobu's smile only grew wider as she showed no signs of anger.

Of course, she showed close to zero interest in any humans other than myself□nothing had fundamentally changed about her in that sense since the days when she sat silently in a corner of the abandoned cram school, her arms around her knees.

Even this exchange that seemed like a conversation with Kanbaru was in fact nothing more than Shinobu talking to herself□she casually looked away from my junior and back to me.

You could say she only had herself to blame, but Kanbaru's body shook and jolted, having been ignored□but let's not get into the perverted stuff right now.

"Oh, no□when I say a monkey, I speak not of this girl. It wore a rain coat and long boots, but 'twas a different person."

"A different person?"

"A different aberration, I should perhaps say. Whatever the case, the aberration I fought elsewhere just now. Alongside a cat."

"Huh? Wha… What are you talking about?"

Could Shinobu, too, have encountered some kind of aberrational phenomenon while I was being led astray by mine? In fact, I was

just thinking about how I don't have a monopoly on getting attacked by aberrations, but a cat?

What did she mean, a cat?

What was going on in this town?

"Oh… Are those scratches all over your body from this…monkey you're talking about?"

So this monkey had nothing to do with Kanbaru's left hand an evil I could neither hear, see, nor speak of.

It was similar to the way I'd gotten lost, in that it wasn't strictly the same as the snail I encountered in May but what could it mean if we were coming across all of these aberrations that were close to but not the same as the ones before, like some sort of rehash of the past?

"Close but not the same? I'd be far more succinct and call it a cheap knockoff. Though to go into detail, about half of these scratches are collateral damage from the cat's attacks."

"Collateral damage… I'm having trouble understanding anything you're saying, but did you also fight this cat you're talking about while you were off elsewhere or whatever?"

"No, no… I was with the cat aye, a contest for the ages in so many ways. But these are mere scrapes. Nothing to fret about. What about thee? Art thou unharmed?"

"Oh yeah. So, um, about that Darkness after you and I split up…"

I still didn't want to be too specific about the topic in front of Kanbaru so I tried to choose my words carefully, but my concerns were apparently unnecessary.

"Nay," Shinobu said. "I've already heard a small bit about that it seems that I myself had been confused about many a thing for over four hundred years. What an utter fool I've shown myself to be."

"…"

Four hundred years.

Hearing about this time span made me recall something entirely different—the message for Shinobu that I'd been entrusted with by the armored warrior.

The enchanted blade it had lent her for over four hundred years…

What I should have been paying attention to, however, was the fact that she'd heard a small bit about it—heard it? From whom? Miss Gaen?

No, she and Shinobu hadn't been put in contact with each other yet—my link to Shinobu was already severed by the time I met Miss Gaen.

Of course, she'd promised to reconnect our link, but—right, I needed to ask Shinobu why she, and not Miss Gaen, was here at this park.

"Hmph. I should think that goes without saying," she said, glowering as she looked up from her position—looking up at me like she was looking down on me. She beamed with a sadistic smile. "I heard it from the tween girl who trampled all over ye."

"A tween girl who trampled all over me? ? ? ? What could you possibly be talking about? You know you're the only one who's ever stepped on me with bare feet, Shinobu."

"I never spoke of bare feet."

"Ah! Oh no! This is what they mean by 'loose lips sink ships'!"

"It seems it's thy loose morals that have brought thee low in this case…" Shinobu said, shaking her head in disbelief. "In fact, thy face is still marked clearly by an adorable little footprint."

"What?!"

I looked at Kanbaru, as if to ask for confirmation.

Kanbaru awkwardly nodded with an Um, yeah. "I kept my questions about what could have gone on while I was passed out to

myself this whole time."

"Come out and say them! Especially if you noticed something! And you enjoyed getting carried on the back of a senior who looked like that?!"

"Even if you're my most respected senior, I don't have the right to give you my unsolicited opinions about your sexual tastes…"

"Why is that the one thing you'd be modest about?! This kind of thing is your wheelhouse, you should be rolling up your sleeves and getting to work! I'd welcome it! The one time I'd want you to stomp your way into my business with muddy boots and leave no stone unturned!"

"But you'd prefer me to be barefoot, right?"

"It's not like that!"

This couldn't be real… Was I really wandering around town with a footprint on my face the entire time? How could anything I did be taken as remotely serious?

And just how hard did Ononoki step on me?

"But in a sense, it's the kind of stamp ye could only find in the world of the printed word."

"Lay off this 'printed word' stuff."

"Hmph… Well, normally I'd be so enraged by such marks that I'd feel compelled to flay thee alive, but that doll-girl did save me, however unwillingly so I shall show thee generosity this one time."

While Shinobu said something unignorably violent, she also said something that was even harder to ignore. Saved.

Saved by Ononoki? On top of hearing about what happened?

"Hold on… Now I really need you to tell me what happened, Shinobu."

“Again, ’tis I who would ask that question more than thee… What exactly happened in that short time we were apart that led thee to have a tween girl’s footprint impressed upon thy face?”

“Well, look at the time. I’ve got to head back to my room to listen to some paper-jacketed CDs on my vacuum-tube amp.”

“Don’t ye try to act cool in some unfathomable way. Vacuum-tube amps and paper-jacketed CDs? The only vacuum here is the one in thy skull, the depth of thy seedy character paper-thin. I’m asking thee about the reason for that footprint.”

“If I’m being honest with you, I don’t know either.”

Try as she might, with her uncomfortably real remarks, to hound me and my attempts to gloss over the subject, I didn’t understand much about anything that was going on, let alone the footprint—which is why I wanted to know what happened to Shinobu, at least.

“Oh, nothing worthy of mention—the cat and I were attacked by a monkey… And just as we struggled in our fight, the doll-girl appeared from nowhere to join us most admirably. What was that girl’s secret technique again, the Unlimited Rulebook? Well, she used it to blow the right side of the monkey’s body right off.”

“…”

Ononoki was putting in good work.

All over the place.

In other words, after she heard from us at the abandoned cram school—or its burnt ruins, Ononoki went after the armored warrior only to come across Shinobu, whether by chance or by fate, just as the former vampire came across this aberrational phenomenon of her own.

Thinking about this, you could say that Shinobu and Ononoki had a strange kind of bond tying their lives together—despite the two getting into a serious fight during their first encounter.

Shinobu may have won an overwhelming victory then, but her powers had been enhanced to a level close to their limit—my link with Shinobu was severed now, so her abilities in a fight wouldn't be too different from an average little girl's. It was also pretty rare for someone as obstinate and ostentatious as her to admit that she struggled to fight this monkey she herself dismissed as a cheap knockoff…

"And then you were saved by Ononoki—which is when she told you everything. In that case…"

If she'd heard about the Darkness, then could she have also heard about the armored warrior that came after it? No—that seemed unlikely. She wouldn't be asking me about what happened if she had.

Ononoki had no duty to explain that much to Shinobu, someone she generally wasn't on good terms with—she must have told her about where I'd be meeting Miss Gaen, which is to say this park, and gone back to tailing the armored warrior, looking for it and scurrying away.

God, what a hard worker.

While part of me was amazed, another part of me didn't know how to feel about Shinobu still not knowing about the armored warrior.

While it would've been easier for me if Ononoki had told her, I felt some sort of inchoate pride over being the one to deliver the news—and I'd been tasked with a message.

"Well, so long as the two of us are fine," Shinobu said. "No, I suppose it isn't as if we're fine."

"…"

If you're alive, you're fine—no, that's what Miss Gaen would say.

"It seems that our link will be restored by the Hawaiian-shirted boy's mentor or some such? Thus the doll-girl said I ought to convene with her, but when I arrived, I found neither thee or this mentor. And so."

“‘And so’ you fell asleep under a swing? What kind of idea is that? Where would it even come from? Even if you did get tired out by your unexpected battle, there have to be better places to sleep. Ononoki went out of her way to save you and your fight was finally over, so why go and do something as risky as□”

“Listen, ye,” Shinobu interrupted me. Her sadistic smile had disappeared, replaced with an unexpected solemnity. “We shall talk about that later. Alas, it seems my battle has yet to end□the fight was not over.”

“Hm?”

“Our battle is only beginning.”

Then, when I looked.

In the direction Shinobu pointed with her chin□it stood there in the dead center of the park.

Kanbaru had her eyes trained on it as well.

Her gaze sharp.

Now I saw that Shinobu’s description was accurate□a monkey in long boots wearing a raincoat. A large monkey that was both familiar and strange.

But only its left half.

As for its right half, blown away by Ononoki’s Unlimited Rulebook□it was a massive crustacean.

There in its place□a crab.

013

The left half a monkey, and the right half a crab.

There's a Japanese folktale about the crab and the monkey, but this wasn't how that went.

If anything was only possible in the world of the printed word, this seemed to be it—I didn't have the first clue how the two halves were connected.

It seemed false, even when it actually stood there before my eyes.

I couldn't accept what they saw.

I only got a sense, nothing else.

Of a hostility or malice toward us coming from the crab-monkey—like a well-honed impulse of aggression.

It conveyed that, and nothing else.

When I say us, though, it seemed to be limited to me and Shinobu—the high school girl known as Suruga Kanbaru seemed to be spared its consideration.

You could say it disregarded her, or that it ignored her. It was one thing when a golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl did it, but my junior wasn't so perverted that she took joy in being ostracized by a monster this evidently dangerous.

Of course, she wasn't the type to celebrate her good luck because it didn't bother with her, either—if anything, she was the type to be infuriated. Readying her left arm to take a fighting stance before Shinobu or I did was proof enough.

Thinking back to everything that happened at the park that night,

Kanbaru's immediate battle-readiness might've been far scarier than even this aberrational phenomenon that had come chasing after Shinobu.

She showed none of the pacifism you expect from kids these days.

Well, it's not like I was expecting some kind of generic reaction out of Suruga Kanbaru, a girl who heroically stood up even to the armored warrior, just because she was confronted with a monster out of a creature feature. But did she just not feel scared or hesitant in the face of danger?

She had to—national-level star athlete or not, she was only a high school student, and it's not as if she was an expert on aberrations.

But this junior of mine lived her life ready to overcome those nerves—it's how she's survived.

Since back in elementary school.

When she made a wish to a monkey and received her reward.

"I'll go from the right. You go from the left, senpai."

"Uh, yeah…"

She even gave precise instructions.

It kind of felt like I was the junior now. Maybe I should be glad she was counting on me in a fight?

"Let's go!"

"Y-Yes!"

Reduced to replying with a polite yes—but that aside, while Kanbaru attempted to make the first move just as she had with the armored warrior, her plans this time were thwarted.

This was foreshadowed.

When we attempted to escape from the fire, Kanbaru noted that she

often mixed up her left and right because she was a lefty—and in fact mixed up her right foot with her left as we tried to get going.

Since it was her feet she mixed up, it wasn't a serious error then, but this time it was direction—Kanbaru and I started moving simultaneously on her signal, but we crashed into each other after one step. I tried to attack it from the right, and so did Kanbaru, causing a traffic accident.

Because of her ability to reach top speed after one step thanks to her powerful legs, she created what you might stylishly call a jackknife—I fell as well, caught up in the crash. While Kanbaru's natural athleticism allowed her to do a somersault and get right back up, my body slammed to the ground in an unsightly display. Despite smacking the dirt with my left arm in a sort of judo front fall, the only effect was my hand hurting from some pebbles.

A judo fall?

Who was I trying to impress here?

Kanbaru, who had mixed up her left and right, was entirely to blame, but it felt as a whole like we'd just proven how amateur and inexperienced we were when it came to fighting together—I suppose tag-team matches do require a lot of technique.

Even Suruga Kanbaru, who exerted her captaincy on the basketball court, was no exception… It made me realize again just how important my link to Shinobu was when it came to fighting as a pair.

Speaking of Shinobu, I looked back to find her sitting on the swing for some reason. There was nothing ordinary about Kanbaru, who readied herself for a fight as soon as she encountered danger, but why would someone start amusing herself on a plaything the moment an aberration chasing after her appeared? That wasn't just out of the ordinary, it was lacking in common sense.

She wasn't thinking of acting like a little girl to get out of this, was she? It might not be on the level of a monkey-crab, but a golden-haired, golden-eyed little girl creaking back and forth on a swing in

a park in the middle of the night easily qualified as horror.

As I let myself be distracted by Shinobu playing on a swing, Kanbaru went back on the move—not waiting for me to return to my feet. I felt abandoned, but what happened in reality was that Kanbaru went to face this creature on her own. In fact, you could say she was defending my prostrate figure—because the fused monkey-crab aberration wasn't just standing there absentmindedly while we tripped over each other.

It wasn't going to provide us with an easy target. It began moving as well, and toward us—but as half of it was a crab, it couldn't go that fast the way it walked sideways. Its movements were so bizarre that I wanted to avert my eyes the moment they landed on it, though. Even if it didn't have speed, it moved in an unpredictable way that left me mentally shaken.

Nevertheless, its form didn't seem to produce a single ripple in Suruga Kanbaru's iron-clad mind—she entered straight into the pocket of this aberration I hesitated to so much as approach. In what seemed like her next movement, she sent her wrapped left hand flying in a fist, the same fist that had scattered the armored warrior to pieces.

Though a jock, Kanbaru wasn't learning karate like Karen. She didn't let out a kiai shout as she swung, but I could tell even from a distance that she put everything she had into the blow.

But.

The thing blocked her fist.

With the right side of its monkey-crab body, the crab part—with its pincer.

"Mgh!"

If this were a game of rock-paper-scissors, it was a unique case of rock losing to scissors—but when you think about it, punching the exoskeleton of a crab wouldn't have much effect.

Kanbaru had failed to think it through—if she was going to launch a

solo attack, she should have aimed for its monkey side.

In any case, compared to the way it walked, the crab's pincer was strangely agile—it seemed to have no weight at all as it blocked Kanbaru's fist like a shield.

Then, the left side of the creature, the monkey half that Kanbaru should have aimed for, began to counter.

The monkey's hand—went to scratch Kanbaru.

The claw that covered Shinobu's body in wounds—missed Kanbaru by less than an inch as she twisted her body to let it by.

Less than an inch from her skin, not her clothes.

Her track jacket ripped.

Uh oh, Kanbaru wasn't wearing a bra!

I forced my wounded body to stand—and it creaked. Not only did I suffer from the pain of getting twisted up and falling, I carried the damage from the blows I suffered while getting unlost, and from the armored warrior's shoulder tackle.

I was reminded again that I'd been relying heavily on my vampiric immortality in my recent fights—but I could reflect on that later.

Regardless of what I was—undying or not, I had to help Kanbaru!

"Hold on, ye."

A voice from the swings behind me—Shinobu, who for some reason was in spectator mode.

Hold on? At least half of that monkey-crab is after you. What're you doing out there in the audience, I tried to get out all in one quick quip, but then…

"Use this."

With that, Shinobu—tossed it my way.

Whatever might have been thrown my way, my reflex was to catch it—but at the last second I saw what it was…

“Waaaagh!”

I barely dodged it—without Kanbaru’s elegance, of course. I’d bothered to stand up, but now I was crawling on the ground again. If Kanbaru had evaded the monkey-crab’s claw attack by only a layer’s worth of clothes, this was only by my skin.

I evaded it.

Namely, a Japanese sword—a great katana.

Whose naked blade stuck out from the ground.

“Wh-What’re you doing?! Were you serious about flaying me?!”

“Are ye only able to handle things thrown thy way when ’tis remarks?” sneered Shinobu, shamelessly, still holding her follow-through there on the swing. Then…

“Use it,” she repeated.

That’s when—I recognized the katana.

The enchanted blade that Shinobu Oshino normally kept sheathed inside her small frame. Kokorowatari. An item used to eradicate monsters.

Also known as—the Aberration Slayer.

“…”

“No need for hesitation. It both is and is not an aberration—one of those ‘bad things’ that are not yet an aberration. No punishment will come to thee for cutting it down.”

True—that went without saying.

This was no time for me to hesitate. I grabbed the hilt of the great katana sticking straight out of the ground and pulled it out like the

holy sword Excalibur.

It wasn't that precious, of course.

In truth, the sword wasn't the original, but said to be created from the flesh and blood of a certain individual…

□Yes, no armored warrior is complete□

□Without a blade□

□Indeed, it has been four hundred years since I lent it to her□

"Aaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Rousing myself with a scream, as if to shake off any uncertainty, I wielded the sword and ran□but I doubt as fast as I imagined.

It was heavy, after all.

And it was hard to use because of its length.

No wonder Shinobu was abandoning the front lines to play on a swing□how could she ever make good use of something this long with her little girl's body?

"…"

Okay, no. I still couldn't accept it.

Help out a little, dammit. Borrow a page from Ononoki.

It took about ten seconds to go from my position by Shinobu, someone used to using others in a different sense than Kanbaru, and arrive at the monkey-crab□all while Kanbaru continued to fight it.

Her track jacket was already in tatters.

The tears were so perfect, she might have been dodging by a layer's worth on purpose, but no, even our pervert couldn't pull off something that skilled□she showed no signs of noticing me as I came running from behind, great katana in hand.

The enchanted blade was meant to cut aberrations, not humans. Kanbaru wouldn't suffer a scratch if I sliced straight through both her and the monkey-crab, but just because I knew this as a fact didn't mean I could execute it.

I was like a dog-lover who doesn't eat chocolate just because it's poison to dogs.

The circumstances were different from that time a little while ago with the cat—wait, now that I mention it, wasn't Shinobu's earlier explanation about the "cat" missing something?

"Kanbaru, move!" I yelled as I swung—with the technique of a complete amateur, but despite what you might expect, katanas are made so that even noobs can use them well enough. They cut using their weight.

I worried that Kanbaru, absorbed in her battle, hadn't heard me, but I needn't have. There's a move in basketball called the no-look pass, where you toss the ball without looking at your teammate, and in this case she pulled off the incredible feat of avoiding me as I came from behind with a sword without so much as turning around.

She couldn't have known that I held a katana since she didn't look back at me, but she'd have moved in the exact same way if she did. That's how well she discerned the path of the enchanted blade Kokorowatari as it cut through the air.

Then, surely enough, the blade I swung—traced a line down the center of the monkey-crab's body, slicing its body vertically.

The monkey-crab divided in two without any resistance, as if its body contained a perforated line—into left and right.

The left, monkey half.

And the right, crab half.

Quite literally split down the middle—I'd swung the blade a number of times before, but this outcome was the most decisive of them all. I'd split a whole in two in a hole in one.

Naturally, the complete lack of resistance, as if I had cut through a block of tofu, did come back to bite me as I met dirt for a third time—that part wasn't a hole in one at all. I had to admit, falling over three times in a fight and still being alive was a bit of a miracle.

The sword stuck deep in the ground once more, as if I'd tried to split Earth itself. My muscles must have gotten stiff from gripping too hard, because I couldn't pull my hands from the hilt. I sat there on my butt like I'd just tried to hit a pinata and failed.

"Ha… Haah… Haah…"

Perhaps the fight ending in a somewhat disappointing way was a given when I'd come to it with a cheat code of an item… Still, I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief, coward that I am.

Being visited by a succession of aberrational phenomena over the course of one night was rare—and we may have been far from finished.

Far from finished—

"Watch out, my senior!"

—indeed.

Despite being split in two, the monkey-crab wasn't finished—okay, the monkey-crab was. What wasn't finished was its tail.

Its tail that I hadn't seen until now.

A snake.

A twin-headed snake—bifurcated from the start, no need for anyone to split it—bared its fangs at both me and Kanbaru.

The yokai known as the Nue is said to have the head of a monkey and the tail of a snake… So this aberration wasn't just a combination of a monkey and a crab, it had a snake stuck on too?

A snake.

Jagirinawa.

The venomous snake that attacked Nadeko Sengoku, friend to my little sister, Tsukihi Araragi—a cursed serpent whose poison nullified even the regenerative abilities of a vampire…

Kanbaru, who alerted me despite the snake's fangs heading for her as well, didn't avoid the attack this time.

The same went for me, of course. Or should that be as usual instead of this time?

With the trusty enchanted blade Kokorowatari almost entirely below ground—I wouldn't be pulling it out swiftly the way I had moments earlier.

The snake's beady eyes had us in their sights.

Then, a pair of fangs buried—

"Kakak. Not so bad."

—no, got buried.

The monkey-crab, now monkey-crab-snake, was finished for good.

Shinobu Oshino had moved to stand in my shadow without me noticing. Grabbing, with her darling little hands, the head aimed at my neck as well as the one going for Kanbaru's left arm, she mercilessly crushed the life out of them.

Then scored me:

"Sixty-two."

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Sixty-two out of a hundred.

A harsh score that tormented an entrance-exam taker like me, but it was a perfectly fair evaluation of someone who'd fallen over not just twice but thrice in a park. In other words, Shinobu had sat there on the swing and fancied herself a spectator because she wanted to see how much I could do on my own.

See, or maybe ascertain.

No wonder she was so quick to lend me an enchanted sword that I once had to beg on all fours for days to borrow.

"Just about perfect for a test of thy strength, no?"

This was her excuse.

I wanted to let loose on her—this isn't the time for such notions, didn't you just get saved by Ononoki, and so on, but according to Shinobu, that too was a matter of perspective.

From my ignorant, amateur point of view, a monkey-crab chimera was visibly frightening and appalling, but from Shinobu's, it was a patchwork of ready-made aberrational phenomena.

Alone, she'd struggled against the monkey, coming away from it covered in scratches, but Ononoki had blown away half of its body. The "bad things" that compensated for the missing half with other aberrational phenomena were nothing to fear—an uneven hodgepodge that could barely move, after one cheap rip-off was stuck to a broken rip-off.

"Its specs seemed to have been lowered as well," she said. "When it came upon me as a whole monkey, it could make use of rain. What a bothersome skill that was."

Rain?

Now that she mentioned it, the crab half, for its part, seemed to be unfettered by gravity—by weight.

Specs that did make me think—similar but not the same as what I knew.

Likewise with the snail earlier—in any case, the half-monkey had lost even this ability to “use rain.”

Ononoki’s Unlimited Rulebook had left it weakened.

In other words, Shinobu had left it to us to handle the persistent aftermath of a bothersome phenomenon—no, the real aftermath started here. And it was Shinobu’s turn.

I say that because she started chomping away at the divided monkey and crab, as well as the snake’s crushed heads. Nutrition for a vampire, the king of aberrations, but it was still a hard sight to bear…

Even Suruga Kanbaru, grand pervert, looked away—I guess it was like accidentally seeing a kitten toying with and eating a mouse?

They say it’s impolite to stare at a vampire taking her meal, so to distract Kanbaru I asked, “Everything okay? Are you hurt?”

She’d avoided every swipe of the monkey’s claws from the looks of it, but the damage to her track jacket was evident. You could tell how much of a healthy and beautiful sportswoman she was from the curious fact that all her exposed skin didn’t come across as erotic.

Even so, I couldn’t leave my junior in such a state, so I took off my sweater and lent it to her. Originally, of course, this was a hoodie that Shinobu had manifested for me.

“Yeah, I’m not hurt—heh. It’s warm. It smells like you.”

“Um, could you not say things that make this feel like a rom-com?”

“More specifically, it smells like your sweat stains.”

“Don’t be specific, either.”

Well, it had been days since Shinobu created it for me, and I hadn’t changed yet… Kanbaru would just have to put up with that.

“Are you sure, though? You’d be topless.”

“No, I won’t be. Don’t think everything you say will be automatically true just because it’s the printed word.”

I was wearing a T-shirt.

That said, it might have been a little chilly for summer, now that it was the middle of the night.

“Hmph. Hold on a second,” Kanbaru said, zipping the front of the hoodie before wriggling around for some reason. She pulled her arms out of the sleeves—it looked like she was preparing a magic trick or something.

After a moment, she extracted the track jacket she wore under the hoodie straight out from around her chest—she’d skillfully taken it off.

“A must-have skill for any girl jock,” she noted, handing me her jacket with a “Wear this.” Ah, so we were trading tops. “Since you’re not braless, it shouldn’t be an issue if you wore a torn-up-feeling jacket.”

“I’m not sure not braless is the best way to describe me.”

A torn-up-feeling jacket didn’t seem right either, but that was more of a vocabulary problem so I wouldn’t nitpick.

I’d never worn a girls’ track jacket before, but then again, I’d half-forced her to wear my clothes first… I couldn’t simply reject her kind offer.

It did feel a little embarrassing, but trading uniforms might have been a more common occurrence for an athlete like Kanbaru than I

imagined.

A very small-minded senior who didn't want his junior to sense the sort of inexperience that getting flustered over indirect kisses or eating off of the same plate suggested, I tried to show zero resistance to the idea whatsoever as I passed my arms through the girls' track jacket.

"Whoa, you look," Kanbaru said, "like a rock star."

"Rock stars don't wear track jackets."

"Whaaat? It's expensive, though."

If Kanbaru called it expensive, it had to be.

I felt bad all over again that this expensive jacket was feeling all torn up.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Kanbaru. I know fighting is the last thing a basketball player is supposed to do, too."

"Enough already. Apologize that many times and I'm going to start wondering if you're being sincere." She sounded broad-minded but was in fact being quite stern. "You don't need to worry. I may be a basketball player, but before that I'm the top general of Araragistan."

"Hold on, when did you form a bizarre nation like that? As far as I know, you're the only person who's stanning me."

Not even Senjogahara was.

If I had to name someone else, it'd be Ononoki these last few days.

"No, don't worry. Every member of my fan club has automatically been drafted into Araragistan."

"What a terrifying system. And we're talking about your own fan club, then. You're your own boss fan?"

I did feel like joining them after she'd been such a stud all night.

Yes, that organization that my little sister Karen Araragi apparently belonged to…but wait, wasn't it unofficial?

"True, I need to avoid violence, but I don't know if you'd call that a fight," Kanbaru muttered, glancing in Shinobu's direction—just as she finished her meal. No trace left of the monkey-crab-snake that stood at three to four times Shinobu's size.

"I just hope the rare meat doesn't give her a tummy-ache," Kanbaru voiced a needless concern. "Oh, and by that, I don't mean how uncommon a catch a monster is."

"Yeah, that clarification really was needless… Hey, Shinobu."

"Hmm?"

When Shinobu turned around, the scratches on her body had disappeared—the energy she'd drained from the aberration by eating it must have healed them. Getting better thanks to a hearty meal seemed like a pretty healthy system to me… Still, energy drain.

Pulling the enchanted blade Kokorowatari, plunged into the ground like a large turnip, Shinobu stored it in her body as if for dessert.

Gulping down a great katana that was longer than she was tall—this too seemed like a magic trick but was by no means a must-have skill for little girls.

No.

It wasn't even a must for vampires—because originally, the enchanted blade didn't belong to her iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded self.

It was a weapon wielded by an expert exterminator of monsters.

Shinobu Oshino originally belonged to the side of those the sword was meant to cut.

"Many thanks for waiting. I'm stuffed."

"Well, I'm sure it was filling."

“Now then. Let us continue our conversation.”

“Continue our conversation… Um, what were we talking about again?”

“Weren’t we talking about why she was sleeping under the swings?” my junior butted in to enlighten me.

Now that she mentioned it, we were.

“By the way, swing in Esperanto is balancilo,” she added.

“No need to enlighten me on that point.”

“By the way, park swing set is an anagram of twinks pagers. That’s why my heart always starts singing when I see skinny young men playing on a swing.”

“You really didn’t need to enlighten me on that point.”

“‘Wait, might those guys actually be…’”

“No, they aren’t.”

“My heart’s singing!”

“Me, I’m screaming on the inside. You’ve got so many hearts in your eyes that you just can’t see straight.”

“Who needs to see straight when they’re doing a number on my heart rate?!”

“You know, maybe you’re the one who needs a pounding.”

She was making me question in the worst ways the fact that Karen still loved to play on the swings.

Shinobu sat there, waiting for our conversation to end.

She seemed just as uninterested in speaking with Kanbaru, a human, as before, but apparently had enough consideration to wait for us to finish our banter.

After experiencing a battle that dangerous (for me at least, regardless of how Shinobu saw it), part of me didn't care why she was sleeping under the swings… But it's awkward telling someone, Never mind, I don't give a damn now.

"Again, 'tis our link. We spoke of how my pairing to thee must be restored, did we not? Else we will be forced to struggle against even poor excuses for aberrations such as those."

"Hm? But what does that have to do with you sleeping under a swing? As far as restoring our link□that's something we need to ask this expert to do."

"Listen, ye. Practice makes perfect□why not try laying thyself a-sprawl, over there."

"What?"

"Thou ought to see something. Come now." Shinobu trotted over to the swings□now unbound from my shadow, she could move freely.

Still, just because she went over there ahead of me didn't mean I'd follow. I wasn't doing this. Lying under a swing? Not something you do past second grade.

Sorry, but I'm eighteen.

That's what I thought as I followed Shinobu, who hopped on top of the swing again. I say again, but instead of sitting, as she'd done like a conceited spectator during my battle alongside Kanbaru, this time she stood on the plank.

She stood and swung back and forth.

This might be somewhat of a tangent, but just for reference, Shinobu wore a one-piece dress.

A skirt bottom.

She stood on the swing and swung attired thus□creaking back and forth at a significant height.

“I’ll handle this, my senior.”

“I could never force a precious junior to. You’re not ready for a mission like this. Let me take care of it.”

We were fighting for the spot under the swing.

The number of bidders for this plot of land with zero interest until moments ago had shot up though the competition wasn’t too fierce, with just the two of us, it still represented a shocking increase.

Zero multiplied by anything is still zero, yet Shinobu had turned zero into not one, but even two. Yes, only a vampire from feudal times was capable of such unfathomable alchemy.

“No, my senior, if you really feel bad about getting me wrapped up in nonsensical battles all because I accepted your ridiculous invitation, let me handle this.”

“Why suddenly so assertive? Where did the unselfish stance you’ve been taking this whole time go?”

“I demand a barter. I seek a memorable experience.”

“See? You’re just a bunch of desires on legs. I’m a year older than you, though. How about respecting seniority here, eh?”

“Respect seniority, when we’re fighting over a little girl? This, senpai, is about juniority.”

“Is that even a word? Whatever, we’ll settle this with rock-paper-scissors.”

“Oh? The version where it’s okay to hit each other?”

“When has there ever been a version like that?”

“You know, like Goku early on in Dragon Ball.”

“I admit that takes me back, but no.” Too bad Goku never used that move as a Super Saiyan…

“Fine, rock-paper-scissors it is.”

“Okay. No shoot.”

“That might be tough.”

“Are you planning on shooting me with something?”

“Rock, paper□”

Scissors.

Kanbaru put out scissors, and I put out rock□since she wasn’t that crab, it meant she’d lost. Scurrying over to the swings before any shooting could take place, I slipped under them like a runner on second sliding to third on a delayed steal.

Agh… Terrifying!

Scarier than any aberration! What was going on?!

Shinobu wasn’t swinging that quickly, but even then, a solid pendulum swinging back and forth only a few inches from your face had such a mental impact on you!

The speed of a pendulum is determined by its length, not its weight, so in the case of a swing, you can control it based on where you hold onto the chain□Shinobu seemed to be shifting tempos on purpose, keeping my eyes from focusing.

The angle was off by ninety degrees, but it made me think of that contraption where an executioner’s sickle is attached to a pendulum□I couldn’t even see no little girl!

What exactly did Shinobu want here, what did she want me to understand? Now that I thought about it, she probably meant seeing is believing, not practice makes perfect, but□hm?

That was when.

I noticed□even as I fought the terror of a heavy object coming and going in front of my face, it struck me, when I used my dynamic

vision to its fullest. Impressive, considering that my eyesight was now just an average human's—I may have only scored a sixty-two on brawn, but my vision was 20/20.

Stuck there under the swing was a picture from a photo booth. It showed Miss Izuko Gaen, the expert we were to meet, making a cute pose (how youthful of her).

The following words were written by hand on the sticker:

"Change → Kita-Shirahebi Shrine."

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Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—a ruined Shinto shrine at the top of a small mountain in our town that has already come up many times before. Its crumbling structures and decaying front torii gate must have paradoxically meant that it was still being managed by someone somewhere, as it was allowed to sit abandoned instead of being cleared out. As far as I could tell, though, it was a forgotten place, with not so much as a single worshipper.

I doubt I'd have ever known about it, either, if I hadn't gone there on a job for Oshino—so Miss Gaen choosing it made her seem all the more like the lady who knows everything.

In fact, Shinobu and I had visited it quite recently—on the last day of summer break, meaning we'd be returning after not much time at all.

A mountain at night, a shrine at night.

The kinds of places you'd dare your friends to go, or at least places you wouldn't be too excited about visiting, but our ship had already sailed—and it seemed like day would break as we headed there, anyway.

Such were my thoughts as I, Koyomi Araragi, a little girl, Shinobu Oshino, and a pervert, Suruga Kanbaru, moved from a park whose name I couldn't read to our next stage.

I wondered what I'd do if Kanbaru demanded I carry her on my back again, but whether out of consideration for Shinobu, the fact that she'd made a full recovery, or unexpected but simple forgetfulness, she didn't. As for Shinobu, she neither asked to ride on my shoulders nor sank into my shadow as usual.

She didn't do the latter because our link had yet to be restored, but

her not asking to ride on my shoulders wasn't because she felt particularly reserved around Kanbaru. Shinobu barely acknowledged her despite us traveling as a group and wouldn't have minded her seeing.

It was because of what I said as we left the park—well, she'd deny it, but at least that's what I think.

What I said—in other words, the message I delivered.

Honestly, I wasn't sure if I should tell her, right until the moment I did—but I had to, given that something about all this seemed to go beyond just my relationship with Shinobu.

I felt a twinge of annoyance over possibly playing into that armored warrior's hands, but after seeing the abandoned cram school burn down, getting lost, and being attacked by a monkey and a crab and a snake—I couldn't continue hiding his existence and his message from Shinobu.

"'I will be coming to retrieve my precious enchanted blade Kokorowatari after a little more recovery'—'It has been four hundred years since I lent it to her, so tell her to be prepared for a late fee.'"

Shinobu heard the words, then looked pensive as she repeated them.

"That is what this samurai said?"

"Yeah… Then he left, howling with laughter."

"In what manner?"

"Hm?"

"I asked ye the manner in which he laughed. Reenact it."

"…"

Reenact it?

That was a lot to ask…

“Ha!”Ha!”Haha!”Hahaha!”Hahahaha!”Hahahahaha!”Hahahaha!”Hahahaha
that.”

“Hm.”

It felt like an excellent reenactment, if I do say so myself, but Shinobu didn’t so much as smile. If anything, she scowled. And then said nothing. I started to feel responsible, having brought it up.

Unable to take any more of the silence, I spoke.

“Shinobu. I’m just throwing this out there,” I attempted to refer to the leading, if improbable possibility, but Shinobu stopped me.

“’Tis of no concern. That is an impossibility. Nothing more than a falsehood.”

“A…falsehood? But□”

“That man died four hundred years ago□I witnessed it myself, with these very eyes. Earth and heaven could be turned on their head, night and day could trade places, and this alone would be set in stone. ’Tis an absurdity, unworthy of discussion.”

“Wait, but Shinobu□”

“Balderdash. Malarkey, even.”

“Okay, I get that you’re willing to use every word you can think of, but…I still don’t understand why you’re ready to go that far.”

“If this samurai were feigning to be him, it must be part of some plot.”

“…”

“Perhaps it means to agitate us□so we shall pay it no mind. It merits no comment. Whatever its intention, that enchanted blade…”

The Aberration Slayer, Shinobu said□then smiled.

She smiled at last.

“I cede it to no one. Were this figure the force behind the monkey and such, I shall slice it in two myself upon our meeting□’tis all there is to be said.”

And with this, our conversation was over.

I for one wanted to dig a little deeper, but Shinobu implicitly refused.

To be specific, she did so by drawing my attention to another subject□her ribs… By the time I realized it, we were engrossed in debate on the topic, and I couldn’t blatantly go back to the armored warrior.

Still, Shinobu wasn’t really so unconcerned that she was on the level when she told me not to be concerned. Or so I thought, not just because she didn’t demand a shoulder ride, but in general. It wasn’t as if she spoke less than usual or was acting strange, but I felt it in the air thanks to all the time, the half-year or so since spring break, that I’d spent as her soulmate.

But if I was going to say that…

Didn’t the armored warrior have the right to feel the same way? The right to feel that way for no particular reason□a much stronger right than me, at that…

Fortunately, no more aberrational phenomena attacked us as we traveled from the park and climbed the mountain to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

A snail. A monkey. A crab. A snake.

Given what we’d seen, I was prepared to find a bee or a phoenix getting in our way next, and was a little let down when they didn’t□but in any case, nothing of the sort obstructed our path.

This made the rules that much more confusing, about whatever was

going on, and what Miss Gaen was trying to make us do.

Going back even further.

I didn't have a full picture of the job Ononoki was handling on her own—as time passed, the story expanded, and the cast grew, the number of mysteries only multiplied, making everything less and less clear.

But—I didn't have to think about that now.

All we had to do was climb this mountain and finally, this time, we should be able to meet with Miss Gaen and get an explanation—and I'd have my link to Shinobu restored after the few days we'd been apart.

The morning, the time when these mysteries would be solved, would come at last.

Or so I optimistically thought, but maybe my lot this night was to run into yet another inconvenience, Miss Gaen missing once more…

Thankfully, however, she was at least present within Kita-Shirahebi Shrine's derelict premises.

Izuko Gaen.

Luminary in her field.

The big boss of her experts, senior to Mèmè Oshino, Deishu Kaiki, and Yozuru Kagenui, aunt to Suruga Kanbaru, and a lady who knew everything.

Izuko Gaen—was there.

Although she'd changed clothes since I met her in a village the other day, her unique fashion choices, like her baggy, XXL clothes and her low-worn cap, told me at first sight that it was her.

She sat by the steps in front of the ruined shrine's offering box, fiddling with her smartphone as she met the three of us—I suppose it was a tablet and not a smartphone, given its size. She noticed us

and raised a hand with a bright smile.

“Hey there, Koyomin. I was waiting for you,” she said. “Good evening—or maybe it’s dawning enough to say good morning? Welcome, I’m glad we could finally meet. Hold on just a second so I can come to a good stopping place.”

I approached Miss Gaen to find that she wasn’t doing any kind of work.

She was playing a mobile game.

…Don’t play games when we’re facing a crisis.

Still, her skillful playstyle and finger speed captivated me before I knew what was happening, keeping me from speaking a word of boilerplate complaint.

“Phew. Okay, all done.”

Miss Gaen closed the app before I could figure out what was going on or how things ended—and just as she placed the tablet to her side, she pulled another device from her pants.

This time she started texting.

“Just a work-related message to Yotsugi—to let her know I managed to meet up with you. This is why I gave her a kids’ phone. Heh, that doll seems to be uncharacteristically interested in you—your face is all the proof anyone needs.”

“My face?”

What’re you talking about, I almost asked, then remembered. I’d carelessly forgotten, but Ononoki’s foot was still stamped across my face.

Did Miss Gaen see it and mistakenly think that Ononoki and I were off having fun or something? In reality, the shikigami had just mocked me and given me a lecture.

“‘Koyomin’s doing well’… Okay. Send. Alrighty, thanks for waiting.

Hello, Miss Shinobu Oshino, Miss Suruga Kanbaru.”

Done with her text message, she put away her cell phone and faced us at last placing her hands on her hips, and bowing deeply.

It seemed a little late for her to be greeting us in such a proper and polite way… I found myself at a loss for words, but the preposterous words that she spoke next truly silenced me.

“I’m Izuko Oshino. Little sister to Mèmè Oshino, whom you know well.”

016

This falsehood was so blatant that it left me dumbstruck—it's not as if I'm so honest that I deserve the title truth-teller, but I was at a loss to learn that anyone could tell such a bold, bald-faced lie.

What?

Now that I thought about it, she'd told me in so many words to keep it secret. Still, wasn't she afraid I might have shared her background with Kanbaru, having asked her to come all this way?

I could even have let her name slip out of my mouth by accident. But then, she was a senior of that ominous swindler Deishu Kaiki, wasn't she?

Boss to a great liar who perpetrated an unimaginably large con game on this town, a man who once tricked even Hitagi Senjogahara—to hope for sincerity from her way of life was a mistake from the start.

Still, her dirty trick, which made me an accomplice to her lie, seemed even meaner in a way than anything Kaiki would do—but that's how it was. I just had to play along.

I didn't have the mental fortitude to speak up here and say: No, we both know that's not true. Your last name is Gaen, isn't it?

Miss Gaen must have discerned this fact in advance, of course—she looked at me with a sunny smile that seemed to contain a wordless message: You get it, don't you?

"Ah…so the Hawaiian-shirted boy had a younger sister. Now that ye mention it, I see the resemblance."

"…"

She'd fooled Shinobu too.

Of course, as another species, Shinobu wasn't able to distinguish between individual humans very well to begin with. Forget any resemblance, I sometimes doubted whether she could tell the difference between men and women.

She never remembered any names or faces—and didn't even try.

"Ha ha ha. I get that a lot. Yes, I feel like I need to apologize for all the trouble my older brother seems to have caused you—"

Miss Gaen kept the act up perfectly.

Her tone was so natural that it made me, who knew the truth, wonder if there was something wrong with her head—the only explanation seemed to be that she sincerely believed she was Oshino's little sister.

…The truth was that she was Oshino's senior. If she was going to lie, shouldn't she be calling herself his older sister?

Why little sister?

Why lie about her age for no good reason on top of it all?

"I'm Suruga Kanbaru."

Whatever the case or the truth.

Kanbaru reciprocated after hearing Miss Gaen's self-introduction.

"I'm employed as my senior Araragi's sex slave."

"Have you seriously been saying that to everyone you meet?!"

I managed to counter a lie this time—call it one of the benefits of being friends. But you could say Kanbaru's problem was far more deeply rooted.

"Ha ha ha. Is that so, a sex slave? So nice to be young and free," Miss Gaen showed understanding.

Her own niece was going down an awful path, but I guess you couldn't act accordingly if you were claiming not to be her aunt…

Speaking of resemblances, though, Kanbaru and Miss Gaen, separated by fewer than three degrees of blood, looked nothing alike. Perhaps it was because I was so tight with my junior that I made a clear distinction, but at the very least, they didn't seem to share a single part in common. I didn't know what Kanbaru's mother looked like, but maybe she just took more after her father?

Hold on, hold on… I was being too hostile.

I needed to give Miss Gaen the benefit of the doubt.

Shinobu and I, as well as Kanbaru herself, were seeking a full explanation of our current situation from this woman—it'd be a big problem if she was simply a pathological liar of a fabulist.

There had to be some reason (I needed there to be one).

A reason she had to hide her identity—thinking about this rationally, Kanbaru's mother, Toé Gaen, had been estranged from the Kanbarus for whatever various reasons, so maybe she couldn't use the Gaen family name?

Right, and it wasn't as if Miss Gaen wanted to meet her long-lost niece. She just needed Kanbaru's arm for some job… Calling herself Oshino's relative enhanced her authority on the subject of aberrations, at least among us.

In that case, I couldn't expose her lie after all… I needed to wait and see.

But if that was true, I had to be wary of Miss Gaen, this kind and cheerful lady—there was no telling when she might lie.

She presented herself as crisp and clear, but in reality, she was a total mess.

She was too much for naive high schoolers.

"In that case, everyone, let's get straight to the matter at hand. Let's

talk business,” Izuko Gaen—Izuko Oshino said, with her arms outstretched. She may have done this to show how open she was being, but it only made me want to close myself off.

“First, let me hear about the adventure you three had on your way here—give me your tale in full. I love hearing about people’s lives, you see.”

“Um… Well, it’ll probably overlap a lot with the report you got from Ononoki.”

“That doesn’t bother me. The same story told from a different perspective is still a different tale—and that aside, there’s no emotion breathed into the stories that Yotsugi tells me. You can’t run through a list of facts and call that a tale.”

She seemed to be fixated on that term, tale—something she had in common with her junior Oshino, whose little sister she claimed to be.

Urban legends.

Whispers on the street.

Secondhand gossip.

I didn’t know if what we experienced that night lived up to any of those labels, but I did know our situation was already at a deadlock. It’d be pointless to try to gloss over things, so I told her about the night’s events, just as they happened.

I did conceal matters that needed to be concealed, given that Kanbaru was right behind me—but just as things happened whenever I could.

The armored warrior that appeared in the classroom of the abandoned cram school.

The ruins going up in flames. The message left to me.

Getting lost and being unable to arrive anywhere.

The chimerical monkey-crab-snake aberration.

Like with Kanbaru, Shinobu never tried to speak to Miss Gaen. An expert or Oshino's senior (little sister in Shinobu's understanding), she was a human all the same. This meant I also had to relate Shinobu's story about her fight with a rain-controlling monkey.

I hadn't learned the details about this battle but figured an outline would suffice if she'd already received a report from Ononoki, who was party to it.

Shinobu acting like royalty and not caring to speak to any humans other than me didn't seem to bother Miss Gaen at all.

She seemed to enjoy listening to all thirty-or-so minutes of my story—all the way until the end.

"You really are used to telling stories, aren't you, Koyomin? That was interesting. A real fine narrator of a man. A real fine man, too."

Miss Gaen smiled and nodded.

I, with my simple personality, felt happy to be praised, but it wasn't as if I'd told her in order to be praised. While I may have finished the tale of my adventures, I wasn't ready to step down from the stage to her applause.

As I spoke, I was reminded of first term—the way I pedaled over to that abandoned cram school every time I encountered some new aberrational story, in order to consult with the expert Mèmè Oshino. It made me feel just a little sentimental, but it wasn't as if I'd come here to consult with Miss Gaen about the night's events.

No, I needed her to restore my link to Shinobu, and I needed to negotiate with her about protecting Kanbaru, but if you went all the way back to the start, I'd come to help Miss Gaen with her work.

I was here at her request.

We'd encountered so much trouble along our way, and even had our meeting spot changed at the last second—I wanted her to take responsibility for the mess.

“Ha ha ha. Don’t be so petty, Koyomin—does friendship not mean a thing to you? You’re going to lose friends acting that way, you know.”

“I don’t have enough friends to lose any,” I said, thinking at first that I’d spoken a cool line, before realizing it was kind of sad—the sky was starting to grow bright as I spoke.

At this rate, I wouldn’t be able to make it to school yet again—I was one thing, but as Kanbaru’s senior, I’d be ashamed if I forced her to skip school too.

Meanwhile, Shinobu looked sleepy.

She hadn’t lost all traces of being nocturnal, it seemed. She may have gotten some sleep under the swings, but maybe she felt drowsy again now that her tummy was full.

But then.

Miss Gaen went and said something—that pried her eyes open.

“Let me cut to the chase,” she began, her tone unconcerned, like this was unimportant. “That armored warrior is the first thrall created by Shinobu’s previous incarnation—Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the legendary and high-born, iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire, aberration slayer and king of aberrations—when she sucked his blood. In other words, Koyomi Araragi, as someone Shinobu turned into her second thrall when she drank your blood over spring break, he’s sort of your senpai. And in the sense that he was the first Aberration Slayer, I guess that makes him Shinobu’s senpai too?”

“…”

“…”

“…”

Of course.

Even if she’d put on airs and made a big, atmospheric show out of

her explanation, I doubt any of us would have been the least bit surprised. Even Kanbaru, neither connected to this matter nor too familiar with it, seemed to have fathomed as much.

I thought so.

That's all you could say.

Nothing but yeah, that's what I figured—yet at the same time, an urge to contradict her welled up in me.

I thought so and figured as much but still wanted to say: No, it can't be, there's no way.

That wasn't the explanation I'd wanted to hear. I hadn't climbed up a mountain in the night to be treated to commentary that a clueless outsider could give. I wanted an expert's sharp insights to open our eyes.

Well.

I guess what she said—did accomplish that task.

"Um. Ye…" Out of all of us, Shinobu was the first to react—but she still spoke to me and not directly to Miss Gaen. "What an utter amateur she is. Is she truly that Hawaiian-shirted boy's little sister?"

That was a lie.

It wasn't true.

But Shinobu had to know what Miss Gaen was going to say—and she must have prepared a line for when she heard it.

Yet she didn't argue directly with Miss Gaen—maybe this wasn't a high-born vampire refusing to deal with humans so much as fear that her argument would be countered and defeated.

"Go and tell her, won't ye? Smack her with the truth sadistically. Thou ought to right this utter amateur's misunderstandings."

"Uh… Right."

Sadistically was asking for too much, but if Shinobu wouldn't say it, that meant I had to—it wasn't as if I could hand this off to Kanbaru. I turned back to Miss Gaen.

"B-But Miss G—" I stammered, almost using her real name.

"Izuko is fine," she beat me to the punch.

First-name basis? Well, fine.

"Miss Izuko."

"Didn't I just say Izuko is fine?"

Drop the honorific? She wasn't Oshino or anything.

"Miss Izuko. Shinobu's first thrall should be dead—he should have died four hundred years ago. Shinobu herself saw it with her own eyes."

"Yes, m-hm."

"He leapt out into the sun as a vampire, throwing himself to his own death—"

Lamenting his misfortune as an expert exterminator of aberrations who found himself turned into a bloodsucker—opposing his own master despite being enthralled by her—bathing his entire body in the rays of the sun, nemesis of all vampires…

He burned up.

And turned to ashes—so.

"So he's gone now—there's no way he's around. It's impossible for that armored warrior to be Shinobu's first thrall."

"Why?"

"Huh? No, like I said—"

"Why? Why is that impossible?"

“…”

Getting asked this point-blank put me at a loss for an answer—I didn’t know how to reply, as if I’d been asked Why does one plus one equal two?

In my confusion, I gave a few replies that weren’t answers at all, like “Well, because he died,” and “Because that’s how it is, those are the rules”—but then from behind me.

Just as candidly.

Kanbaru spoke up.

“But if you’re going to say that, wasn’t he an undying vampire because he doesn’t die?”

“Huh?”

He doesn’t die, and because he doesn’t die—he’s undying?

No wait, that can’t be right… That’s not it, I mean, sunlight is a vampire’s absolute weakness… Just like garlic, or crosses, or silver bullets, so…

He burned…and turned to ashes, and…

Hm?

If we’re going to talk about characteristics, though…

Just like I discussed with Ononoki as we ate ice cream that day—a vampire’s immortality is on a different order from a ghost’s or a tsukumogami’s.

It’s not that they don’t die.

They’re undying because there is no death for them.

In other words—they’re not immortal because they come back to life.

They’re immortal—because they continue to live no matter what

happens.

Vampires.

“Ah…could that mean…”

“That’s right, Miss Suruga Kanbaru—just the kind of brilliance I’d expect from someone who made the monkey’s paw work for her,” Miss Gaen said. “In other words, four hundred years after throwing himself to his death—after scorching his body, turning to ashes, and returning to nothing, the vampire has made an amazing return.”

He’d come back despite becoming nothing but ashes and bone.

No wonder the legendary vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade chose him to be her first thrall, Miss Gaen remarked bluntly.

017

“All right, now gather ’round.

“Now that I’m done cutting to the chase, why don’t we do things in order. I suppose I’ll give a chronological explanation of what happened while using this tablet’s dazzling screen to provide some illustrations—yes, vampires are of course weak to the sun.

“Even an elementary schooler knows that—and not even the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade is an exception.

“Neither are her thralls, of course.

“But while the king of aberrations whose name spread, without exaggeration, around the world is no exception, she is beyond the pale—her weakness does not function as a weakness.

“In fact, Koyomin, didn’t you get set ablaze under the sun’s rays over spring break yourself? But you recovered after that, right?

“Yes, I know.

“The same thing happened to the body of the First.

“That’s what this is—of course, since he threw himself under the sun on purpose in order to die, and not by mistake like you, I guess you could call it a would-be, or rather, a would-never-be suicide.

“It does seem like it took a bit of time for him to return, though.

“A brief four hundred years or so.

“Or to be more precise, even now, four hundred years after his would-never-be suicide, the First has still not managed to fully return.

“You faced off against this armored warrior yourselves, so you must know, right? I bet you felt that the armored warrior was getting stronger and stronger—but if we’re being accurate, it’s not that he got stronger.

“He’s recovering.

“He’s on the road to rehabilitation.

“He’s trying to return to his full self—so yes, he used that energy drain on you and Miss Suruga Kanbaru to feed and restore himself. Just as Shinobu recovered from the scratches she suffered from that mockery of an aberration by eating another mockery of an aberration.

“Maybe I ought to call you a sterling example of a successor, Koyomin, because you ended up aiding the First in his speedy recovery—no, no.

“I’m not just talking about tonight—I’m pointing to your personality, to the entire way you’ve been acting lately.

“You don’t understand what I’m saying? Don’t worry, you will soon.

“To put it another way, I personally wanted to put an end to all this before it got to this point.

“My plan was to have Yotsugi handle it herself.

“I messed up a whole lot of my calculations—just because I know everything doesn’t mean that everything goes the way I think it will.

“Especially, Koyomin.

“Especially when I’m faced with reckless, impossible-to-predict youngsters like you who don’t operate according to logic—which is why I took responsibility for getting my calculations wrong and stepped out into the front lines myself, and it’s why I asked you for help.

“You might think that some mean old lady is getting you wrapped

up in one of her annoying jobs right now—but really, this lady's giving you an opportunity.

"The perfect opportunity to take responsibility for the very things you bungled—but I doubt you'd be quick to see it my way.

"You might never be able to see it my way.

"But Koyomin, has it really never crossed your mind? Why you've been encountering these troublesome aberrational phenomena over the last six months on what seems like a monthly basis?

"You don't find that strange?

"Why the legendary vampire—

"Why, out of all the places in the world, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade visited the very town you live in over spring break.

"Was it just a coincidence?

"Why the crab girl, why the snail girl, why the monkey girl, why the snake girl were in this town.

"Why the aberration hunted by my junior who gives even me trouble, Kagenui…

"Why the phoenix lived here in this town too. Do you think that's just another coincidence?

"The cat—the circumstances may have been a little special in that one case.

"But that must be exactly why the armored warrior stepped so carelessly on the tiger's tail—when you look at it that way, fortune favored you.

"A tiger, huh. Heh.

"As someone who'd once gone up in flames himself, the First must have been traumatized by the fire and the blaze—no wonder he

decided to make a temporary retreat.

“If you manage to survive long enough to see Tsubasa Hanekawa again, you’d better thank her□hm? You don’t know what I mean by that, either? Then don’t worry about it yet□I’m just saying that your friend is a tragic girl who defends you, intentionally or not.

“You seem to think that things that happen to you could naturally happen to others, and while I feel a sense of modesty coming from your rejection of miracles, your way of thinking has one large flaw.

“Which is that you’re judging anyone who’d see you as special as wrong□I’m really sorry for saying all these vague things.

“I start to want to lecture about life whenever I see a spunky youngster like you□I bet Mèmè, my big brother, would just give you a ‘You’re so spirited, something good happen to you?’ and leave it at that, but I regret to say I’m not as tolerant as that novice.

“Speaking of which, didn’t I promise to explain things in chronological order? Then I’ll keep my promise. In the end, keeping promises is the quickest way to get results.

“Let’s start four hundred years ago□when the current Shinobu Oshino, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, made her first slave after not creating a single thrall until that day.

“She drank the blood of a human.

“The reason things came to this□that’s something I can skip over, right? It’s been told in another place, and it’s in the past.

“For you and for him.

“From the perspective of an expert aberration exterminator, finding himself on the side of the exterminated was something he couldn’t take□he couldn’t face the fact that he’d become a monster. And so he chose death.

“He threw himself under the sun.

“He turned to ashes and vanished, swept away by the wind□or at

least, that's what should have happened.

"To Heartunderblade he left all his rancor, as well as a replica of the enchanted, aberration-slaying sword, Kokorowatari—and they all lived happily ever after.

"Except they didn't, for reasons I explained above.

"Even if he turned to ashes or disappeared, he didn't die—he may have vanished, but he wasn't gone. He may have died, but he couldn't die out.

"He.

"Kept living.

"He turned to nothing, he turned to nothingness, and he kept living.

"Over the course of four hundred years—over the course of a dizzying, a depressing amount of time, he slowly but surely restored his body.

"Burned by the sun each time he recovered, broken each time he put himself back together, he didn't succumb, didn't grow discouraged—he recovered.

"I can't say this with any first-hand knowledge because I've never had the experience of being immortal, but I imagine those four hundred years were like hell—a Sisyphean ordeal.

"Of course, you can't even laugh at the idea of a vampire being tormented by demons.

"He would doggedly pile up little pebbles.

"He could pile them up and up, but one swing of a rod would ruin it all. One beam of sunlight would ruin everything.

"Sunlight on a clear day would force him to start rebuilding from zero whatever little bonds he'd formed—and so this fruitless process of trial-and-error went on for this dizzying amount of time as he tried to recover.

“Of course, it’s not as if the First had any sort of firm will of his own now that he was ash. This recovery is more like a vampire’s biological reaction, probably nothing more than a reflex…

“When you think of it that way, it wasn’t fruitless so much as hapless.

“A sad case of unlimited continues in a game you can never beat.

“He couldn’t even die, all because he’d inherited a legendary vampire’s damned immortality.

“Eternal youth and life in the truest sense—I’m sure Yotsugi would have been able to put him out of his misery if she’d been there, but we’re talking about four hundred years ago.

“In any case.

“His karma looped endlessly in this one-man transmigration—which he’d be forced to repeat forever.

“That was the first Aberration Slayer’s fate—but.

“His persistence was something special—the legendary vampire had chosen him to be her thrall for a reason. So, with a will that he shouldn’t have had.

“With what little will he had.

“He rode the wind—still as ash.

“He was scattered but reassembled.

“Persistently, one speck at a time.

“Through sheer determination—he returned to this town.

“And he did so fifteen years ago.”

018

“H-He came back? To this town?”

While I’d stayed silent as Miss Gaen went on and on, thinking that I shouldn’t interrupt her, I couldn’t hold back any longer when I heard those words, and reflexively spoke up.

Came back to this town? Really?

She didn’t mean to say□to this country?

“Oh, when the timeline says fifteen years ago, that’s a rough chronological estimate. It might not be accurate, but the number is meaningful□because it was exactly fifteen years ago, when I was still in college, that I came up with the idea to create, by way of necromancy, an immortal shikigami aberration named Yotsugi Ononoki using a human corpse that had been used for a century. And then…”

Miss Gaen looked at me with what seemed like a meaningful stare this time.

“That’s exactly when the phoenix came upon its next host□which is why your friendly Izuko thinks that the ashes making up the First must’ve gathered in this town right about then.”

“…”

Fifteen years ago.

That number wasn’t what gave me pause, by any means□but hearing her say fifteen years ago did bring one more thing to mind.

When Tsubasa Hanekawa was given the name Tsubasa Hanekawa□back when she was three, that was fifteen years ago, right? No, that couldn’t have anything to do with this. Was I

reading too much into things?

The tsukumogami. The phoenix. The cat—no, but if I was going to say that, why focus only on fifteen years ago? If that's what we're talking about, I should think not of a point in time but a span of it, from fifteen years ago to this very moment.

The snail—first lost eleven years ago.

The monkey—whose wish came true seven years ago.

The crab—who stole a girl's weight three years ago.

Even what happened with the snake just two months ago came into consideration.

"There's no way… Are you really saying that all these stories of aberrations are the fault of those ashes riding into town or whatever?"

"Of course not. Yozuru and company didn't make Yotsugi in this town, anyway." Miss Gaen easily replied in the negative—but the denial felt so light that I couldn't see it as total. "I'm just saying it's an underlying cause. Or maybe I should call it a sign that should make you think. Every aberration has a reason—but this is nothing more than part of that reason. The aberrations you encountered were your own fault, generally speaking—I'm not letting you off the hook here. But," she said, glancing at Shinobu with what somehow felt like sympathy. "Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade came to this town during spring break—because of those ashes, I have to assume."

"What foolishness."

At last, Shinobu—turned directly to Miss Gaen.

Either she couldn't allow me to handle her business anymore, or she couldn't keep her silence. Her eyes glinted with what could almost be called malice as she set them on Miss Gaen.

"And ye claim to be that Hawaiian-shirted boy's little sister?"

That wasn't who she was, of course.

"I visited this country then because I wished to see Mount Fuji."

"Haha. Our sacred mountain? True, the forest in its foothills is a famous suicide spot. But this mountain isn't Mount Fuji. We're not even in Shizuoka or Yamanashi, we're in the wrong prefecture altogether—did you get lost on your way there? All while three vampire hunters were after you? No, you didn't get lost. You were led—to this town."

"Led?"

"If you'd like me to give an example, take how that armored warrior happened to wander into the abandoned cram school where you and Miss Suruga Kanbaru were meeting. Though I'm sure the First had neither a consciousness or an unconsciousness when he so politely knocked on the door."

"…"

Silenced, Shinobu grated her sharp teeth. She wasn't even attempting to hide her anger, which suggested that Miss Gaen was right on the mark.

As for me, it wasn't anger that I felt. It was disgust.

How to put it—Miss Gaen made it sound like all the travails visited upon me converged on one man, and I found it disgusting.

No.

Maybe it was just displeasure.

But when I thought about it, that wasn't how I should be feeling. If I now had an answer to the nagging question "Why is this all happening to me"—shouldn't I be glad?

So why did I feel sucky?

If the First had laid the groundwork for everything Shinobu and I did together—that would be no reason to feel displeasure. Why

should I feel inferior?

It almost seemed like I was jealous or something.

Even though she'd told me not to be.

"Impossible," Shinobu said, after a long silence.

Her tone was direct, strong, and final.

"Impossible 'tis impossible. He died that man died. Died a death. He was an utter fool who lent no ear to my persuasions, who chose to toss his life away. Thy words are nothing more than sophistry. Underestimate not my poor sense of direction."

"Well, I do think your poor sense of direction deserves to be made fun of ha ha ha, you sound pretty insistent there, Shinobu. You almost make it sound like it'd be a problem if the First was still alive, you know?"

Miss Gaen was undaunted by Shinobu's intimidating demeanor Shinobu's former self, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, was no easy figure to take on, even for an expert, but Miss Gaen showed no signs of fear.

She only continued to provoke her.

"If anything, you ought to be celebrating that your beloved slave is still alive and trying to restore himself as we speak. I wouldn't mind arranging for a party, you know?"

"Don't ye tread too far, expert."

Shinobu had allowed herself to be provoked, and her body shook with anger even I found myself upset by Miss Gaen's tone, but seeing Shinobu so shaken actually helped calm me down.

"Don't ye tread too far into sensitive matters. What do ye claim to know about what took place four hundred years ago?"

"I know everything there's nothing I don't know," Miss Gaen declared. Then she seemed to shift the topic to something

completely unrelated. “There’s even a reason I changed our meeting place from the park to this shrine.”

Now that she mentioned it—why did she change our meeting place anyway?

“I kind of feel like I’m being kept out of the loop here.”

Then…speaking of calmness, the calmest person present—though maybe she was simply confused by Miss Gaen’s words—raised her hand and spoke. Kanbaru.

“Is it okay if I ask a question, Miss Izuko?”

“Go ahead, Miss Suruga Kanbaru.”

“Um.”

Since this was Kanbaru, I wondered if she might be trying to smooth things over with a ridiculous line. I worried for her as her senior, but she asked the smiling Miss Gaen a proper question, and a surprisingly on-the-nose one at that.

“For four hundred years, this guy kept repeating a cycle of coming back, then getting turned into ash again because of the sun, right? That would mean he was still basically just ash when he came floating into this town fifteen years ago, wouldn’t it? Then what exactly caused the cycle to stop and let him present himself to Araragi-senpai as an armored warrior?”

Did this girl ever feel nervous? She was being talkative, even social with someone she was meeting for the first time. Maybe she unconsciously sensed their kinship? No, Miss Gaen was treating her niece the exact same way as me and Shinobu.

“Why do you think that was, Miss Suruga Kanbaru? Can you come up with a guess as to why the cycle ended—why the First was released from his barren karmic cycle?”

“I can’t, but…does the reason have something to do with why you changed our meeting place?”

A weird way to connect the dots, I thought, but Miss Gaen replied, “You’re a sharp one” with a quick lick of her lips. “Ah, what a waste of talent to let you roam free—but I’ll respect that eccentric’s wish.”

“What eccentric?” asked Kanbaru, confused.

“Don’t worry,” Miss Gaen said, “you’re not out of the loop. In fact, you might just be at the center of it—I might only be saying this because of how often people refer to me as their senpai, but Miss Suruga Kanbaru, it’d be nice if you could support your own senior.”

My juniors are all such good-for-nothings, the boss expert added, not in a half-joking manner but as a serious lament, shrugging her shoulders.

“Of course. Serving Araragi-senpai’s person from the waist down is literally my job.”

“Think you could serve me from the waist up too?”

Kanbaru looked surprised to hear this… Sheesh, like she didn’t know what I meant.

“Fifteen years ago,” Miss Gaen changed the topic, opening her timeline again. “The First returned to this town—his wanderings came to an end as he floated back into this, his hometown. What seemed to be his eternal trip through hell had reached its goal.”

Hometown? Having tossed the word in casually, Miss Gaen continued without placing any importance on it.

“And each of those grains of ash floated in and gathered in this town’s air pocket of a spot… Right here, in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, built even then at the peak of this little mountain.”

019

“As you can see, this shrine has fallen into ruin—with no one taking care of it, it’s become an absolute mess. Of course, it wasn’t always this way, but we’re not here to talk about the founding and history of shrines, we’ll discuss it another day if the opportunity presents itself.

“I do hope it does.

“In any case, this shrine was still being properly maintained fifteen years ago—seems like it was a nice and tidy little place. And I don’t mean that as an insult, that’s praise—it needs to be nice and tidy because this place is an air pocket.

“An aberrational air pocket.

“A place where it’s easy for them to appear—easy for them to gather.

“A place where those ‘bad things’ gather before becoming aberrations.

“As well as a place where aberrations—come to an end.

“Geographic conditions have a lot to do with this kind of thing, you see. Like with locations that people call ‘haunted highways’ or ‘suicide spots’—taken together, they’re all places where ‘that kind of thing’ tends to happen. If you can pin down all of these points and all of these places, you can prevent accidents from ever happening—you can avoid them. Mèmè, my big brother, has the job of gathering stories of aberrations, but as far as my job goes, it’s supposed to be more of this sort. Prevention, in other words, tidying up things before they happen—unless you clamp down on these spots, each of these hotbeds of scenes that dot everywhere you go… you can’t prevent accidents.

“Hm? What? No, I said hotbeds of scenes, not hot beds obscene—what would that even mean? That sounds like a pretty awful accident, too. I don’t want you and your junior going to any of those, okay? You two partner up in other ways. That’s not what I mean by supporting your senior, Miss Suruga Kanbaru.

“Well, I’m just making things complicated by bringing up such specialized topics. To radically simplify, this is one of those kinds of places, which is why an onmyoji sorcerer so famous that I dare not speak my name in the same breath once built a shrine here, deified a god, and clamped down on it.

“It went well for the most part.

“The place functioned as a proper defense—those ‘bad things’ gathering here that could form into an aberration were properly scattered.

“The shrine had a good god, you see.

“But there is a limit to everything—um, Koyomin? You’re studying for entrance exams, right? Do you carry a good-luck amulet, in that case?

“A good-luck amulet.

“Did you know those things have an expiration date? They expire when the paper charm inside of them rips—those wondrous and miraculous items aren’t effective forever, and neither was this shrine or the god deified here.

“Fifteen years ago—that limit was reached.

“But it’d be too harsh to blame the shrine’s managers, to say nothing of its god—how could they see it coming?

“The ashes of the first thrall of a legendary vampire gathering here from every direction—that’s just too much.

“It was too much.

“It’s not as if he came parading back home triumphant—but what

did happen is that Kita-Shirahebi Shrine collapsed once, fifteen years ago.

“Both in spiritual and physical terms.

“Your thrall really is something, Shinobu. Destroying an entire shrine as nothing more than ash—though I’m sure his former life as an expert had something to do with it.

“Hm? What’s the matter, Koyomin? It looks like something just clicked for you. Ah, it’s suddenly making sense to you that Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was even more ruined eleven years ago, when you time-traveled to a past world the other day.

“That’s right, that—was the First’s doing.

“The shrine that should have held this spot down—couldn’t hold down a vampire thrall.

“Just for reference, they tried to renovate this shrine not once, not twice, but three times after that—but there’s nothing shakier than repairing an empty shrine with no god.

“It collapsed each time they tried to renovate it—it broke down and withered away.

“The problem is Shinobu—or rather, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, or the First, her thrall, have such power that their very existence brings aberrations to them.

“So let’s go back to eleven years ago.

“When you visited this shrine then, weren’t these ruined grounds filled to the brim with ‘bad things’? You thought it was strange for them to be here in such an intense concentration, but there was nothing strange about it. Those were the building blocks of aberrations that the First’s ashes had gathered here.

“The building blocks of aberrations—and of his diet.

“After all that exposition, I assume that even someone without specialized knowledge such as yourself can guess what happens

next, Koyomin—you can guess the reason why the First's ashes, gathered here, managed to escape his karmic cycle.

"That's right.

"If this shrine is a place where bad things easily gather, and if the First is an aberration that is easily gathered—that means all the conditions were in place for an accident to occur.

"Accidents—overlapped.

"The First, on the grounds of this very shrine.

"Here on the grounds of this godless shrine…he ate and ate, restoring his strength.

"It was barely anything at all, of course—I wouldn't call it drinking the mist, but maybe like eating plankton. As a thrall, and as a pile of ashes at that, he couldn't gather the massive amount of 'bad things' that Shinobu did. He couldn't gather food on a scale that could risk the breakout of a great yokai war in this town. He only made it a little easier for aberrational phenomena to take place here.

"Just the difference of a five-percent chance turning into six percent, or maybe seven percent at most.

"Of course, that's significant from an expert's point of view—life gets hard for us once you're past the five-percent mark, but we'll put that aside for now and just say that his environment changed.

"Just by a little, yes, but he could now feed—his existence of cycling between ashes and nothingness ended here.

"What began then unfolded over the next fifteen years—this tragic figure's dramatic return.

"A drama of return.

"Or just maybe—a drama of revenge."

020

A drama of revenge.

I couldn't stop myself from gulping when I heard those heavy words, but Miss Gaen's story made so many things make sense. I, at least, had a hard time dismissing it outright.

Did Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade come to this town during spring break not because she got lost, or because she was being chased by three experts, but because her thrall, the aberration-gathering First, drew her here? Is that what Izuko Gaen was saying?

He called aberrations to him—and one of them was a vampire.

He invited his master's presence.

He invited a suicidal vampire into the town he'd made his stronghold—no, according to what I'd just heard, the armored warrior only acquired a firm will of his own in that old cram school. It's not as if he'd consciously called Shinobu to him…

The hypothesis did suggest something, however.

After fifteen years, this existence that had floated into town as nothing more than ash—after fifteen years all but surviving on the morning dew, it would have at last returned to the level of being able to summon a legendary vampire. Though I'm not sure you could call it "summoning" given that she was the master and he the thrall…

And while he'd increased the probability of aberrational phenomena occurring in this town by a few percent for fifteen years now, at this point it seemed like I encountered aberrations almost monthly—or daily, depending on how you framed it. Didn't that have something to do with all this?

That worried me. It really worried me.

But at the same time…

When I think how it was here, in this deserted shrine forsaken by gods and worshippers alike, that the First kept on living for fifteen whole years—no, in that sense, four hundred years.

Four centuries.

An unimaginable span of time—for a mindbogglingly long period.

Kept on living didn't begin to cover it.

It was like he kept on dying.

It was—simply torture.

No more than five seconds under the sun as a vampire caused me a transcendental amount of pain—four hundred years of it? What do you have to multiply five seconds by to get four hundred years?

"No need to be on the lookout, Koyomin—the First has already left this shrine. He's not here," Miss Gaen said, taking out her cell phone.

A different one from the one she used a moment ago to contact Ononoki—I thought she might be texting someone else, but it seemed she was only checking the time. I realized it was morning already.

"Hm…good timing. I think I'm more or less done explaining, but Koyomin, Shinobu, Miss Suruga Kanbaru, anything else you don't get?"

"W-Well, there's still a ton of things I don't get," I said in a panic, practically clinging to her before she could bring this to an end.

"Whaaat. Can't you figure out most of the rest?"

"Wh-What should we even do after this? What kind of job did you want us helping out on?"

“Like I said, you need to take responsibility. You’re going to pick it up. You’re going to take in the responsibility. You, Koyomin and Shinobu.”

Miss Gaen didn’t mention Kanbaru this time and Kanbaru said nothing in return.

“You said the plan at first was for Ononoki to handle it herself, right? That the situation now was beyond your calculations so could you tell us what the original plan was?”

“Fine with me. There’s no point in telling you about it, though. I don’t see how it could possibly be carried out now do you remember why Mèmè, my big brother, came to this town?”

“Because Shinobu came here, right? I want to say Kaiki gave the same reason. As for Miss Kagenui…I feel like she heard about it from Kaiki?”

“That’s right. All of those experts, each with their own unique quirk or two, came to this town for similar reasons and the results of their investigations came to me. I am important, believe it or not.”

Miss Gaen continued.

“After scrutinizing these results the intel I received from each of them, I came to know about the odd chain of events taking place in this town over the last fifteen years. The way the wind was blowing here. I came to know this this friendly lady here who knows everything came to know the four-hundred-year-long tale of the First that I just finished explaining to you.”

“…”

“That’s why I sent Yotsugi here again. To lower the occurrence rate of aberrations that had risen by just a few percentage points. Her job was to clean up the ashes to tidy up a shrine, to put it simply?”

Yotsugi Ononoki, one half of a two-man cell specializing in immortal aberrations. It seemed she still didn’t know her mission when she encountered me on the last day of summer break but she’d been given her Cinderella-like mission right afterwards.

Vampires are like the poster children for immortal aberrations, so cleaning up after one of their thralls does seem like her kind of job.

Okay, maybe I could have figured that much out without having to ask any questions—but why did she fail?

Did Ononoki ever fail when it came to her work?

We're talking about that workhorse who saved not just my life but Shinobu's over the course of one night here.

"Well, Ononoki does have an airheaded side to her…so maybe she fails now and then?"

"You're making it sound like it's someone else's problem, Koyomin. Yotsugi failed because of what you, plural, did."

"What we did?"

Who was included in this you?

A look at Miss Gaen's eyes answered this, though—she looked only at me and Shinobu.

"Just a guess, but does it have something to do with me and Shinobu using the…'bad things' gathered in the air pocket—which Oshino's talisman had sealed so they'd disperse over time?"

A blind guess.

I honestly didn't have the first idea about what we'd done, but that was about the only thing Shinobu and I did after we met Ononoki on the last day of summer break.

We used the "bad things," precursors to aberrations, left behind in this shrine to travel through time like we were in some sort of horror, or maybe more of an SF story. Had that backfired in some kind of way? No, those careless actions had already backfired plenty—but even more?

"If anything, if we came in and swiped the energy that could potentially serve the First's ashes. Wouldn't that delay his

resurrection? I don't see it speeding things up, at lea□"

I looked back at Shinobu as I said this□to find her biting her nails.

Hey. Isn't that what you do when you're irritated?

Did you think of something?

We'd used the shrine's gathered energy to return from eleven years in the past to the present, too…if we'd messed up by doing that, what did it mean?

"Shinobu didn't do anything," Miss Gaen said. "Anything□she didn't need to do anything. Coming to this shrine was enough on its own."

"…"

"To correct you on one point you might be misunderstanding□when I say the First drew Shinobu here, that was only by way of their master-servant relationship formed four hundred years ago. It's not as if he asked her to show up the way you might ask someone with a text or call. In other words, he didn't know he was doing so until then. He had no idea□that his master had come close. He had no idea that the monster that had made him into a monster had come."

"…"

"To be honest, I don't know how much my dear older brother, Mèmè, had figured out□he doesn't say a whole lot, and even his reports only contain the bare minimum. All I really know is that he used that talisman to carry out first aid on this shrine□which you can say ended up starving the First out, but in his hungry state□"

Pushed once more to his breaking point.

Just then, in that state of mind.

"He found out. He□saw her. Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade. For the first time in four hundred years□he witnessed her."

A quiet gasp.

Shinobu stopped chewing her nails—and looked up.

Stunned, clear shock painted on her expression.

Right.

Right—when I visited this shrine with Kanbaru on an errand for Oshino, and again because of Sengoku, Shinobu Oshino had yet to start living in my shadow.

It wasn't until then that she first stepped into this air pocket—

"In other words," Kanbaru said pensively.

When we started talking about time travel, she could have lost the thread, as if I was talking about some dream from the night before. Commendably, she was keeping up.

"Seeing Shinobu for the first time in four hundred years gave the First strength, and this stimulation made him rouse himself despite being nothing more than ashes—resurrecting him despite his starved state?"

"Who ever said anything that romantic?" Despite Miss Gaen's high estimation of Kanbaru up until this point—she seemed to be unimpressed with this one opinion. "Why would ashes be roused back into life for a reason out of a teen rom-com? An existence close to his appeared in physical proximity, that's all, causing his aberrational nature to be rapidly excited. You know how putting a magnet against some iron for a while magnetizes it for a bit, so it can suck up iron sand? It's more or less like that."

"I see…" Kanbaru nodded. She seemed to want to press her point, but swallowed the words—an attitude you didn't see very often from someone as unreserved as her. "But it's true that Shinobu coming here had the effect of exciting…or booting up the First?"

"That's right, which is why Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was an empty husk by the time Yotsugi came here on her mission. A job that should've required little more than a duster got a little more difficult. She had to start by finding where the First had gone off to. While you two were out having fun time-traveling from this shrine

gate, we were having all kinds of trouble.”

“…”

We weren’t having fun, but I couldn’t blame her for thinking so.

“By now, you must’ve figured out my task for you. Hunt for the First—and it’s not just that I want more hands on deck. Sheer manpower could result in casualties… Rather, as her second, you’re suited to finding her first. The First and the Second, slave and slave, should end up attracting each other.”

Don’t worry. It’s not like I want you to clean up the ashes, Miss Gaen assured.

“Though it’s a little too perfect that you encountered the First before I gave you the deets, Koyomin—not to mention that you helped him grow.”

“Grow…”

True—I’d helped him.

The armored warrior, sluggish and heavy when he first appeared, could even speak well after draining my energy and Kanbaru’s.

If anything made us responsible, that would be it—right? Though it didn’t seem like we could’ve avoided that outcome even if we’d known all this beforehand…

“Oh, sorry, did I make it sound like I was blaming you? You did make fairly irregular moves, but at this point, I’m almost grateful. You made the job easier for me in some ways—especially by endowing him with speech. That one’s big. If he can understand words, that means we can negotiate—we can go carrot-and-stick.”

“Carrot-and-stick…”

Miss Gaen was truly Kaiki’s senior in that everything she said sounded like a lie, but this was the part that made her Oshino’s. He did hate the idea of exterminating aberrations, for the most part.

But I laid out in my mind the clear, the oh-so-clear profile of the armored warrior.

The vampire thrall who made use of every aberrational phenomenon that occurred in this town over fifteen years.

A legendary vampire's first slave.

The First which made him my senior.

And Shinobu's as well, in terms of the title of Aberration Slayer, as the original wielder of the enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

Most of all.

Immortal.

"Isn't it Miss Kagenui you should've asked for? You know, Ononoki's master, the violent onmyoji who specializes in immortal aberrations?"

If Oshino was a pacifist, Miss Kagenui was a warmonger.

I never ended up having to face off against her directly, but she was skilled enough in combat that she could probably go toe-to-toe with Shinobu however, Miss Gaen only shook her head.

"I can't control her," she said. "I'd prefer it if she has to spend the rest of her life complaining about never seeing action."

Getting Miss Gaen of all people to say this was kind of impressive.

Something about the onmyoji did strike me as unconventional, even among the various experts I knew, and I guess there really was something special about her.

"Will Ononoki be enough as far as combat reserves go?"

"No. When I got my status report from Yotsugi yesterday which is to say when I heard that you and the First had come into contact, I already went ahead and called in another helper. Who's waiting to meet up with me."

So that's why she was concerned about the hour.

My being slow to understand must have eaten up more time than expected—so she was right, things don't always go exactly as planned, even for someone of Miss Gaen's level. Let alone for someone of mine…

"B-But a helper? Ononoki really isn't good enough on her own?"

"She's not, because I'd like to settle this before today is over," replied Miss Gaen, as unhurriedly as always—but for once, I sensed her determination as a professional. "Now that he has a will, and now that he's conscious, and now that he's able to use that energy drain as he wishes, the longer we leave him be, the stronger he'll get—doubling up and up and up and up and up and up. He'll make a full recovery if we aren't serious about tackling this. He'd be too much for me to handle at that point—that's when I really would have no choice but to call in Yozuru."

"…"

She spoke about Miss Kagenui as if she were some sort of inhumane weapon…

I nearly cracked a smile for the first time in a while, but the words that came from Miss Gaen's mouth next were more than enough to make me pull it back in.

Whatever the case.

"What I want—is to kill him before he eats a human."

021

Miss Gaen handed me a five-thousand-yen bill with an All right, I'm going to get going so you go buy yourself some breakfast if you're hungry, Koyomin. She then started to descend the mountain to go meet this helper, whoever it was. Shinobu and I were now left behind on the shrine's grounds. Miss Gaen never gave a clear explanation as to why she changed our meeting place from that park to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, but her idea must have been to use this spot to explain something she originally had no intention of discussing with us. Her hand had been forced when the armored warrior began to move in earnest—and so she directed us here.

As for my link with Shinobu, it had yet to be restored. It seemed that Miss Gaen's original plan was to repair it as soon as we met—to cram Shinobu back into my shadow, but that'd have to wait until a little further down the line, now that the first Aberration Slayer had recovered to a level where he had an unmistakable ego of his own. It was safer to leave it until everything was settled.

Even if he didn't have a real consciousness when Shinobu and I time-traveled from this shrine, the fact that he entrusted me with a message to her, in that burning cram school, meant he already knew about her presence. We couldn't afford to let our location slip out to him by raising the level of Shinobu's vampirism.

To return to the magnet example, restoring our link and increasing Shinobu's vampirism might raise the armored warrior's vampirism by way of their link—right, just as I'd been modulating my body's vampiric powers.

Don't worry, I'll keep my promise—I'd never be mean and not restore your link after dragging things out this long. In fact, it'd be a problem for me as an expert if I didn't—because all it takes for Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade to be considered harmless is for her to be sealed in your shadow, Miss Gaen had argued. Not that

I didn't believe her, but I couldn't deny the feeling that she'd climbed down the mountain before this and a lot of other things could be resolved.

Yes, she might not have had any other choice, since she needed to pick up this helper—but speaking as someone who thought we'd be protected if we met up with Miss Gaen, part of me did feel let down when she went down the mountain.

Shinobu and I aside, I wanted to ask her to protect Kanbaru, a bystander I'd involved in this whole mess—but Miss Gaen had assured us that there was no need to worry.

The sun is starting to come up, after all. You're safe until night—your sense of this fact might be a little off because of Shinobu's free-spirited nature, but vampires are nocturnal. That's why you're safe during the day. You could even use this time to rest—because I'm going to put you to work at night. There's no real reason to hang around this shrine anymore, so why don't you go back home for now and put on a change of clothes?

That's what she'd said, but I couldn't possibly in our situation. I did feel bad about making Kanbaru skip school, but it seemed like the right choice was to make these shrine grounds our base for the day.

Oshino's holy of holies talisman, which Kanbaru and I had deployed here by his request, had purified this shrine, once an air pocket of sorts. To my amateur line of thinking, that vaguely meant the place was safe…

Upon consideration, it made perfect sense that Kanbaru had felt unwell that day and similarly fatigued this time around—the armored warrior's ashes were within these grounds back then.

If not a fleck of those ashes remained… Still, as her senior in both school and skipping it, I worried about her attendance record.

"Really? It's okay, you don't have to worry about that kind of thing."

"Oh… Well, you, I guess, can catch up after a day or two of classes,

if you have good attendance for the most part."

"Yeah. Also, I wouldn't mind having to repeat a year if it was for your sake."

"Could you please not put that heavy of an emotional burden on me?"

I only felt more guilty now. She was too straightforward of a person.

I already felt like I'd never be able to atone for acting as a mediator and bringing this mild obstruction into her life.

"No, really, it's fine. I'm being serious when I say you don't have to worry. And anyway, mild obstruction almost sounds like child abduction."

"So what if it does? And why would your mind go to that?"

"Hm? Oh, you want me to explain my logical seduction?"

"You mean induction. Stop it, I don't want you putting the words child and seduction anywhere near each other. Aren't you supposed to be a wholesome young athlete? What kinds of workouts did you do to end up that way?"

"Child adduction."

"As in grabbing children's bodies and pulling them toward you…"

Speaking of which, Shinobu Oshino.

Once she'd finished hearing what Miss Gaen had to say, she watched her climb down the mountain but didn't offer any thoughts.

Her attitude standoffish.

Of course, it was true she couldn't dismiss everything with an "Impossible" after that thorough of an explanation…

I felt anxious seeing her like this, so I blurted out a cowardly, “So what’re you going to do, Shinobu?” But.

“What is there to be done?” she asked back, sounding bored. “Though an irregularity may have occurred, we must act in accordance with that expert’s plan. Whatever the case may be with him, he shall be finished this eve. ’Twould be one thing if he were in his full and true state, but just as I myself showed this spring break, he’ll prove no match for multiple experts in his half-boiled condition. Despite what that expert said, I believe the doll-girl might be enough on her own.”

“…”

“He will be eliminated, and that will be the end of it. Done. That is all—nothing left for us to do. If they say his power may increase when near me, then I ought not to meet him, though that may not be the case for thee. His end will come unknown to me… I must say this just in case, my master, but do not worry thyself when ’tis not called for.” Her eyes alert, she continued as if to drive the point home. “While that woman spoke in ways to incite thee, in part to amuse herself—I have neither first nor second thrall. What use do orders and numberings have for me after five centuries alive? I was sure to preface my story to thee the other day, was I not?”

“Preface? Like what?”

“Occupy not thyself with foolish envy. Stem thy emotions at adorable jealousy. Do not worry.”

Thou art the only one for me now, she said.

Having lived for five hundred years (almost six hundred, actually), she probably meant it with her advice, but it still seemed like she was trying to be considerate towards me—Kanbaru only listened quietly.

In any case.

A nonstop crisis that had begun at nine the previous night finally seemed to hit a short breather after the twelve-or-so-hour mark.

“Hit a short breather? So like spanking someone when they’re panting,” Kanbaru offered strange advice about how to deal with a hyperventilator. She continued to say idiotic things despite it being morning already (she did meet with me after napping, so maybe she was only now hitting a giddy, sleep-deprived high), but it eased the tension and as it eased, my stomach growled.

And so, I decided to take the five-thousand-yen allowance given to me by Miss Gaen (I didn’t want to think of it as payment for a job) and go buy some breakfast, just as she suggested.

I might not be able to go home yet, but that didn’t mean I’d fast until nighttime I wouldn’t call myself resistant to hunger now that my link to Shinobu had been cut, nor could I allow my junior to starve.

“I desire donuts.”

At least one thing about Shinobu was the same as ever.

Kanbaru, my overachieving junior, asked “Should I go run over and get some?” but I’d barely done any work yet and wanted her to let me do some shopping at least.

“Really? I want to make it up to you for kneeing you when you weren’t able to heal.”

“Oh, that… It’s fine, you don’t need to worry about it now.”

“Hm. Okay, then I won’t.”

That was fast. Not that I minded.

“In that case, I’ll look at Shinobu.”

“Hm?”

“I’ll look after Shinobu.”

“…”

Was it really okay to leave Shinobu and Kanbaru alone? They were

practically meeting for the first time. I couldn't bring Shinobu shopping with me, though. It might be safe during the day, but best to have her sit still.

In fact, Shinobu might be safer around someone as mobile as Kanbaru than with me, now that I'd lost my abilities…

Anyway, I was glad that Kanbaru was so quick to accept.

"In that case, my senior. I know I shouldn't be this brazen, but could I ask you for something while you're out shopping?"

"Hm? What is it, you can tell me anything."

"I want you to buy me a book. A new one coming out today."

"Out today? Huh. Fine with me, I'll go pick it up then. It looks like we'll have to wait around, so you can just read it until it's night."

"It's a light novel, is that okay?"

"Come on, Kanbaru. Really? Do you see me as someone who treats light novels as a decadent art? I'm the kind of high school boy who buys true-blue shojo manga with the front cover facing up at the cash register. Don't think of me as someone who'd ever be ashamed to buy a book."

"It's a relief to hear that."

"So, what's it called?"

"The Savage Garçon Huffs and Puffs and Blows the Half-Boy Down!"

"That's one of those light novels that's not light at all, isn't it?!"

What kind of books are you trying to get your senior to buy you?!

So it was boys' love after all…and what was with that title?

"Don't judge a book by its title. I know titles are getting more and more attention these days, even in the world of literature, but a lot

of classics have pretty slapdash names.”

“True, a novel is all about its content. Can I expect much out of the content of this one, though?”

“Oh, you can. Even experts have high hopes for this, the twenty-first book in the series.”

“That’s way too long of a series! And who are these ‘experts,’ anyway?!”

“The greatest mystery of the series, introduced in the very first volume, is going to be revealed at last: Is the savage garçon the one behind the carriage arson?”

“Probably?! The author dragged that out for twenty-one volumes?!”

“Oh, and when I said ‘Bon appétit ♪’ last night, that’s actually a line I borrowed from the series’ protagonist.”

“So it was literally a line out of a boys’ love novel?!”

And here I was thinking she sounded cute!

I’d never been more cheated in my life!

“Whaaat? You’re not gonna buy it for me? Then maybe I’ll just go home.”

“I’ll buy it, I’ll buy it! Happy?!”

Don’t try to threaten me.

What was she doing, pressuring me like that?

Was she going to leave over this, when she refused to after I explained again and again just how dangerous our situation was?

Even Miss Gaen couldn’t have anticipated the allowance she gave us being used for BL…

“Oh, right. You don’t have to, but if you can, could you also buy me a bra?”

“No, I can’t. So I won’t.”

“Don’t worry, I know you can do it.”

“Your expectations of your senior are always too high, you know.”

“I don’t care about the design. Just pick one that you think looks good.”

“Don’t put it on my sense of fashion when it comes to bras.”

“Listen, there’s a million kinds of bra designs out there, but what really matters is what’s on the inside.”

“You think you’re so clever.”

“I can’t go braless for much longer. I want to take care of what they’re made to hold. I know I’ve supported you for all this time, but right now, I’m the one who needs some support.”

“What you need are boundaries.”

Of course, the main reason I went down the mountain, tasked with what seemed like some sort of punishment, was consideration for Shinobu and Kanbaru’s safety. But it also had to do with just how awkward it’d be if Kanbaru went instead, thereby leaving me and Shinobu alone on those shrine grounds.

I felt a keen hatred for just how small I was as a man.

I was worrying myself over things that weren’t serious at all□being alone and letting my head cool off seemed like a good idea.

I don’t remember when she said it, but I recalled one of Hitagi Senjogahara’s first-class aphorisms.

“It’s wrong to think that the strong look down at the weak□in most cases, they aren’t even looking at them in the first place.”

She probably said it before she turned a new leaf, given how sharp-tongued it was, but it’s probably true.

My thoughts and worries must have been incomprehensible to Miss Gaen for that reason—did the “nice lady who knows everything” even have a grasp on the concerns of someone of my level?

Don’t feel envious.

Don’t worry yourself over something stupid.

Shinobu was right—but why didn’t she feel worried? Was there really nothing for her to worry about?

Her first thrall, who she thought had been separated from her in death four hundred years ago, had been resurrected after all that time—could she really stay unemotional about it?

And if I was going there, what about the armored warrior himself?

I didn’t know how he felt about Shinobu—he may have hated her for turning him into a vampire, but until that the two were close, straddling the wall of human and aberration. Now that he had his will back, what did he think of Shinobu, with whom he once fought side by side?

She’d return the enchanted blade Kokorowatari to him—that’s what he said.

The sword was also a replica created in order to cut Shinobu down…

“…”

This too must have been a pointless concern.

Just as Shinobu said, Miss Gaen had no intention of allowing her to meet the first Aberration Slayer—whether the armored warrior plotted a drama of return or revenge.

Or of reunion. It wouldn’t be realized.

The curtain would abruptly fall first.

The rate of aberrational stories occurring in this town would surely

drop by a few percent if the experts dealt with the armored warrior—happily ever after, hip hip hooray. Whatever discomfort I felt barely meant a thing—something small, just like my concerns.

The object of my concerns would be eliminated while I was busy being concerned with it.

That's how it went.

This situation had grown out of me not finishing my homework over summer break—thus would my memories of my last summer as a high schooler be bookended.

I climbed down the mountain and returned to town as I wasted my time thinking these thoughts. On my mental shopping list were "Breakfast," "Book," "Donuts," and "Bra."

The most efficient itinerary would be: bookstore, supermarket, Mister Donut, then lingerie shop. It'd minimize the amount of time I had to carry a bra and allow me to return to the shrine without getting taken in by the police, considering the patrol routes and timetables of the officers in the area.

Fortunately, it was a weekday morning, so Senjogahara and Hanekawa would be at school. I wouldn't end up getting scolded by them.

I'd already sent a message to let them know I was safe, but maybe I should send one more, just to make sure they didn't worry? All while being absolutely sure not to get them involved, now that I had a better idea of the situation…

The thought went through my head as I started with the bookstore—what was the name of the book Kanbaru wanted again? It felt like my brain refused to memorize it, but…something about a garçon?

Speaking of which, you often see butlers positioned in the world of subculture as antonyms to maids, but garçons were their real counterpart, I mused as I searched the shelves, only to find it. The Savage Garçon Huffs and Puffs and Blows the Half-Boy Down! And

what a cover. It managed to keep up with the title… Forget freedom of expression, it expressed the full possibilities of human freedom.

They even released both parts on the same day.

The covers even connected to make a big picture.

I couldn't believe it. Even the copy on the bands around the covers connected□I know it's all the rage these days, but whoever made this was way too into connections.

While part of me was dumbstruck by the kind of junior who'd order her senior to go buy these for her, this was also what made it impossible to hate Suruga Kanbaru.

Given her national-level physical talent, her honest personality, and her incredible mental fortitude, just being close to her could make you feel inferior and suicidal, but she was also a pervert□when I thought of it that way, even these novels seemed lovable to me.

Still, I did feel a little embarrassed about buying just these two volumes…though I'd be opening up a huge can of worms if I started worrying about what bookstore employees thought of me.

It wasn't manly of me to buy a book as camouflage for another, but it actually seemed smart to avoid being too manly here. That kind of camouflage would be a kind of courtesy to the employee at the register, like thanking a bus driver when you get off. It wasn't as if I had a book I particularly wanted to buy for these deceptive purposes, but I was in a perfectly fine bookstore with a wide selection of titles. Not only had Sengoku looked up info about snake curses here, this is where I'd picked out some study aids myself.

I picked up the books in question for the time being, but another thought came to me.

It had been a while since my link to Shinobu had been established, but now that it had been severed by the Darkness, I was truly acting on my own for the first time in a long time.

I acted freely.

Freedom.

I was in the middle of running errands—but when I thought about how Miss Gaen would soon restore our link, my freedom struck me as being fleeting. Kaiki's senior though she may be, Miss Gaen surely wouldn't refuse to repair our bond…

In that case, shouldn't I at least make the most of this moment of freedom, this liminal space of extra time where I didn't have to concern myself with anyone's eyes, whether human or aberrational? The thought came to me in a flash, leading to an idea, and so as part of my search for literary camouflage, I headed for the first time in a while to the adult books section.

"Hmm…"

They didn't call this the town's only major bookstore for nothing.

Their lineup lived up to all my expectations.

Still, a rather discerning eye was necessary to pick out something that could neutralize the destructive power of the front covers of Kanbaru's BL.

It's not as if I didn't buy these kinds of publications in Shinobu's presence, but part of me always tries to show off around her—I wanted to choose without having to worry about how it looked in this rare moment roaming free.

It'd been so long that I didn't fully recall my way around these shelves, but I formulated a certain standard as I inspected them—a guiding ideology.

All of that earlier talk from Kanbaru of child abduction and whatnot reminded me: because I'd spent so much time having fun with Shinobu, Ononoki, and Hachikuji lately, people's suspicions that I was a pedophile were growing by the day.

I didn't think Kanbaru had been trying to humor me, but given the time and season I found myself in, the best thing to do would be to buck the trend and clear up these suspicions.

In other words, cougars.

Handing the volumes to Kanbaru, or taking them out of the bag, I'd nonchalantly show her a glimpse of a cougar mag, proof that her senior Araragi was by no means a pedophile—I'd have her know that when disinterested and true to himself, it was cougars that Koyomi Araragi desired. Something about this felt like I was only making the problem worse, but I put those concerns aside and began my investigation with this new guiding foundation.

I ended up agonizing for another hour, ultimately picking up two photo books with covers adorned by women whose clothing choices could be said to resemble Miss Gaen's. Much Introspection and Logical Formulation naturally led to cougars. I alternated these between Kanbaru's two volumes, creating a milf-euille of sorts, and brought it to the register with a sense of accomplishment.

3,850 yen.

That got pretty expensive…

I now had to cover breakfast for three, including donuts, as well as Kanbaru's bra with the remaining 1,150 yen—not to mention that it'd be the afternoon by the time I got back to the shrine.

Sheesh.

Could I not even shop right? How depressing.

If only I had half of Kanbaru's caliber as a person, or half of her guts, I surely wouldn't be worrying like this, I thought as I walked away from the cash register—and then.

I nearly knocked over a boy standing right behind me—that was close. Could he have been next in line to pay? No, he'd still be too close…

He was empty-handed anyway.

And wait, a boy who looked to be an elementary schooler being in a bookstore and not at school felt awfully strange.

Wearing long hair, a vertically striped sweater, and capri pants, he could almost be mistaken for a girl, but hah, did he really think he could hide the fact he was a boy from me? He was five years too late for that.

“…?”

What could it be?

Was he watching me making a captivating purchase out of boyish curiosity? I could understand if that was the case, but it was five years too soon for him. I tried to pass by him, but.

But then.

“Hello there, Second.”

The boy spoke.

“Did ye give my message to Kissshot?”

His voice sounded like mine.

022

In the blink of an eye, the situation grew dramatically tense.

It was the middle of the day—the sun high, a blue-sky morning. Even if we were in a building, the encounter should have been impossible. The books I'd bought almost fell out of my hands.

I just barely held on, but—ridiculous.

How?

Hadn't Miss Gaen assured us that we'd be safe until night? And if that's who this boy was.

If this child was—him.

Then why did he look like a boy?

I never asked exactly how old he was, but judging by the story Shinobu told that day, I assumed the first Aberration Slayer was a man in his prime.

Are you telling me this fresh-faced boy wore that empty armor?

However, I soon came to a hypothesis that answered both of my doubts at once—and not because I'm sharp or have any distinguished powers of deduction.

I'm not Miss Gaen, nor am I Hanekawa.

But I just knew.

I knew because of a precedent.

The dregs of a legendary vampire nearly indifferent about moving around at any hour, in the form of a little girl—while this couldn't

be the same, had the armored warrior recovered to the point of taking human form, size aside?

In that case… In the time after he left that abandoned cram school in flames—just how much energy had he drained?

That armored warrior.

This boy.

"…"

"Hahahahaha."

The boy Aberration Slayer turned his back to me and briskly started to walk off.

Perhaps this was out of common sense, and he didn't want to cause a backup in front of the cash registers, but where had he learned that kind of common sense? Could it have been his energy drain? Absorbing not only physical energy and voice—but even knowledge?

"Let us leave. As First and Second—as fellow beings whose blood was sucked by the same vampire, let us two talk frankly. Ye must have something to say to me, no?"

Though I felt zero emotion coming from him the night before, whether he laughed or choked me during that appearance, he seemed different as a boy and I could see his expressions as he spoke.

Still, it seemed wrong to construe his relaxed attempt to invite me outside as innocence or guilelessness—just as Shinobu's true nature was that of a six-hundred-year-old vampire, however old she may appear to be.

The first Aberration Slayer was a man in his prime—no.

A vampire over four hundred years old.

I needed to think of him as someone with the ability to absorb every customer and employee in the bookstore in the blink of an

eye if he felt like it.

I didn't say a word, but I didn't disobey or defy him. I followed behind the boy Aberration Slayer and left the store.

His steps lively, mine languid.

I did feel pathetic, but there was nothing else I could do here—no matter what happened next, I didn't want to involve any bystanders.

Calm down…

Don't feel shaken—and don't be too pessimistic, either.

I calmed my breathing.

True, the First appearing in the middle of the day, a time when Miss Gaen said it was safe, was a twist that I hadn't been emotionally prepared for at all, but I shouldn't despair.

Vampires are weak to the sun.

An absolute rule.

One that could not be broken, something set in stone—for him to be active like this under it, walking around on public streets, meant that the first Aberration Slayer, in his boyish form, should have nearly all of his abilities as a vampire unavailable to him.

Just as for Shinobu.

He should only have the kind of boyish strength that his appearance suggested—but was that really the case?

Even if it was, the first Aberration Slayer was no ordinary human—he'd been important enough to ride in on a palanquin.

A professional fighter of aberrations.

A warrior who donned armor and swung his great sword in battle. Could someone like me, an average high school student raised in a

peaceful era who didn't even play sports properly, put up a fight against him? I doubted I could even move around if I wore armor.

The First and the Second.

Shinobu said there was no point in making that kind of comparison.

Thou art the only one for me now, she'd said, but to what extent could I believe those words? How seriously could I take them?

"'Tis nothing to look so worried over, Second."

And then.

The First spoke to me as if he saw through my concerns as he walked on, looking for a place suited to talking alone.

"'Tis not as if I'll bite."

"…"

"I am an expert. Though the age may have changed, I would not ignore another's sign and seal," the boy said, walking with both hands in his back pockets. True, I didn't feel any of the hostility I sensed from the chimeric monkey-crab-snake aberration in the park.

He may have been telling the truth about wanting to speak freely with me□but a sign and seal? What did he mean? As in signing my name in calligraphy then literally pressing a personal seal over it?

My expression might have betrayed these doubts, because the first Aberration Slayer turned around, took a hand out of his pocket, and pointed at his own face.

The left side of his face.

Then it struck me□or rather, I remembered.

My face had Ononoki's footprint on it□no, a whole night had passed. It must be gone by now, right? Or was it still there?

A stamp.

A mark.

That's how Shinobu described it.

"This is my prey, keep thy hands off—that is what the mark means. A sign among experts. Thou art inviolable to me so long as 'tis there."

Aye, as an expert. The boy Aberration Slayer turned back around—sticking his hand right back in his pocket as well.

"Without that mark…hah. As if I'd allow a vampire to remain alive for a single moment."

"…"

Ononoki had abused me verbally as she ground her foot into my face… So this was her hidden intention. She was protecting me from experts by imprinting a mark of her territory on me—as a shikigami, she may not have had any intent or will, but her footprint was keeping me safe.

Who could have imagined the line I'm going to be the one to kill you, monstieur was sincere? It seemed like getting stepped on by tween girls was worth it after all.

So that's what it was. Her lecture was also her way of being clever, shooing away any others with her shoe—could Miss Gaen have been talking about this mark when she said I was safe during the day? Thanks to Ononoki standing on my face? Had she predicted that the first Aberration Slayer, whose existence as an "expert" was strongest during the day, wouldn't lay a hand on my marked self? And is that what she meant when she said that face of yours is all the proof anyone needs? If that was the case, she could have said something.

Wait, so when I bought Kanbaru's books and my photo collections—having perfectly neutralized the two in my mind—there'd been a tween girl's footprint on my face the whole time? That really altered the situation from my original intentions… I wondered what the clerk thought about me as I paid. When I

thought about it, the track jacket I had on was pretty avant-garde, the way it was shredded. On top of that, I left with a mysterious young boy… How was I ever going back to that bookstore? It was the only major one in town, too…

In any case, even if his earlier comment—As if I would allow a vampire to remain alive for a single moment—was just banter, it was potent.

Those vampire hunters during spring break were the same way… Did this mean I shouldn't see the first Aberration Slayer as an expert with a preventative approach like Miss Gaen, or with an investigatory focus like Oshino, but as being like that trio who specialized in exterminating aberrations?

But what about himself?

He was now one of those aberrations he needed to exterminate, a vampire.

He said he wouldn't allow one to remain alive for a single moment—but it's not as if finding fault with his words amounted to pointing out a contradiction.

Because this armored warrior who now took the form of a boy—in fact killed himself.

He committed suicide—and for four hundred years.

He continued to die.

"This place ought to be suitable for a relaxed conversation."

After a bit of a walk, the boy Aberration Slayer stopped in an odd open plot. I didn't know what it was for—experts really were skilled at finding these kinds of remote, inconspicuous places, whether it was the abandoned cram school or Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Maybe their eyes saw different things—Miss Gaen said something about geographic conditions earlier.

I followed him into the empty plot—thinking back on it, I may have

been too careless. True, it was unlikely for any bystanders to get involved there, but it also meant no one would come to my rescue if push came to shove.

Maybe I felt emboldened by the sense that Ononoki was protecting me.

The boy Aberration Slayer plopped down on the ground in the utterly empty piece of land, a little too cramped to call a lot. He looked like nothing more than a scamp with no manners, but something about the way he acted made it seem like he was ready for anything. Maybe it was just my preconceived notions, but he reminded me of a martial artist prepared for a fight…

“Koyomi Araragi, was it?”

He spoke my name—just like that.

No surprise. He was the First, and he’d called Shinobu by the name Kissshot.

Calling me by name wasn’t the issue here, though.

How did he know my full name?

Did Kanbaru call me that in the abandoned cram school? No, it was always my senior or Araragi-senpai.

Even if he’d heard her using my last name, he couldn’t have learned my first name.

Did he do research on me? In just one night? No…

“Allow me to call thee Sir Araragi.”

“Um…sure. That’s fine with me.”

“In that case, Sir Araragi.”

I didn’t know where it came from, but the boy Aberration Slayer offered me a plastic bottle of tea with an innocent smile on his face—his own in the other hand.

“Do not worry, these goods are not stolen. I paid for them properly and purchased them at the vending machine over yonder. An act of hospitality on my part. I am a fighter, not a master of the tea ceremony, but I do believe in the spirit of treating every encounter as precious. For this will likely be the last time the two of us speak under such peaceful conditions.”

“…”

A plastic bottle of tea?

I mean, putting aside the stuff about tea ceremonies (my little sister is in a tea ceremony club, and even she hasn’t learned anything about tea in plastic bottles), why was the first Aberration Slayer, who’d been dying for four hundred years until his consciousness was restored just yesterday, able to handle a polyethylene terephthalate bottle like it was the most normal thing in the world?

The theory that he could absorb knowledge with his energy drain suddenly started to seem a lot more credible… And what was up with his clothes? If he hadn’t stolen the tea, he probably hadn’t stolen his clothes either… Sure, he could have figured out the money part somehow, but a vertically striped sweater?

He was also wearing the kind of rubber sandals that were only getting popular in the last few years… How did a human from four hundred years ago have such a modern sense of fashion?

Shouldn’t he be getting confused and mistaking cars for iron boars?

It was almost as if he knew everything.

I took the bottle, though I felt anxious as I did so, and sat down to face him… So this would be the last time we spoke peacefully.

It could also be taken as his final attempt to negotiate as an expert, at that.

That’s what I thought, but I was wrong.

We spoke, but about nothing as simple as a negotiation.

In gentle terms, a request.

In harsh terms, an order.

In fact, it was a declaration of war.

“I shall cut straight to the point, Sir Araragi,” he said.

Just like a blade.

“I would like ye to leave Kissshot.”

023

“Surely thou must not object? In fact, thou must wish for this. Ye simply happened across Kissshot this spring break—and because ye happened across that fearsome vampire, ye had no choice but to enter into a partnered relationship. Restored to this current state, ye must have no desire to shoulder such a heavy burden—or am I mistaken?” asked the boy Aberration Slayer, staring at me.

Me, someone he’d consider his junior.

“Kissshot needs not two thralls—would ye not agree?”

“She shouldn’t even need one,” I answered—something like an attempt to steer the conversation off-topic, but I’d also thought so for a while. “Both you and me—we became her thralls by accident. She never planned on creating any.”

“I do wonder about that.” The boy Aberration Slayer gave a weak laugh. “Well, she is indeed aloof enough.”

Though I couldn’t help but feel annoyed that he was acting like he knew Shinobu, when I thought about it, he did know more about her than me.

My relationship with her had only lasted for the half-year or so since spring break, but the amount of time Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade spent with the first Aberration Slayer four hundred years earlier spanned years. From his perspective, I was greener than green.

“I do of course believe I understand the situation—I know ye and Kissshot are bound to one another in a relationship that can never be severed.”

“You know…”

About my relationship with Shinobu.

A warped master-and-servant relationship between soulmates.

Right. In that sense, my stance regarding Shinobu was different from the first Aberration Slayer's□theirs was pretty warped itself, but probably not as much as ours.

My relationship with her was more irregular than his□which is why, according to him, I was the one who ought to step aside.

"But why do you know th□"

"There is nothing I do not know about the stories of aberrations that take place in this town□I am close to omnipotent as far as aberrations in this area."

For fifteen years now, he said.

Fifteen years ago□when the first Aberration Slayer, turned to ash after throwing his body under the sun, was assembled here after four hundred years of convergence, carried bit by bit by winds and waves.

Ever since, it became just a little bit easier for aberrational phenomena to occur in this town□making his existence an underlying cause of every such tale.

The crab. The snail. The monkey. The snake. The cat. The phoenix.

If he understood everything about it all□then that's where he got his knowledge, having regained consciousness.

He'd done all his fieldwork by way of his own ashes□which meant he could probably speak any Western name he wanted, not just Kissshot's.

He only grew stronger and stronger, and endlessly gained in knowledge. It felt like he was trying to show just how much greater the First was than the Second.

Shinobu may have called it pointless to compare us, but at this

point, there was nothing to even compare.

He was incomparable.

Who was more suited to be the thrall and slave of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire? The question wasn't even worth asking. The answer was simple, a freebie.

But…

"I don't understand. Did you come back to form a partnership with Shinobu? What is it that you want? Why are you telling me to leave Shinobu?"

"Shinobu—Shinobu Oshino. Yes, so that is what ye have decided to call Kissshot," he took in my question without giving a direct reply. "Why do ye not call her by her name? Is that not an affront to a vampire?"

"You know why. You claim to be omnipotent. Why would you ask that if you're basically this town itself?"

"Calling me that goes a step too far—ah, I keenly see how distinct our personalities are. What a difference there is between the First and the Second."

I found it hard to believe he was being considerate as he spoke to me, but disparity might have been more apt—I bet he never expected his successor to be a youngster like me.

Of course, in his current form, he was far more of a youngster than me… But there had to be some kind of sly intent behind his delicate, all-but-girlish features.

"My goal is—Kissshot," he said with his pandering looks. "To reconcile with the one ye call Shinobu Oshino."

"R-Reckon?"

"Reconcile. Now that my physical form has been restored, I desire the same for our relationship. Thou must know, given thy demeanor. Kissshot and I separated after a quarrel—I said such

heartless things to Kissshot in a misguided moment. I wish to apologize to her, and to be forgiven.”

“…”

“Then, just as we did before—I would like for us to fight aberrations together. I would like to defend the back of that spine-chillingly beautiful one with the looks of a goddess, fighting as her sword.”

Ye may not understand—he said, as if to draw a line between us, and in fact, I didn’t. Well, okay, I knew that Shinobu—the former Shinobu was a spine-chillingly beautiful demon, that I would never deny.

But fighting as her sword?

Is that—something he desired as an expert?

Or was it something he desired as a vampire thrall?

He was requesting the return of the Aberration Slayer’s enchanted blade Kokorowatari—so that he himself could become a blade, his master’s right arm?

Maybe he wasn’t yet able to make his intentions clear back when he entrusted me with his message? No…how could I believe that?

Then Kanbaru had the right take on the situation.

As nothing more than ashes gathered in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

He sensed Shinobu’s presence, which excited him into existence all to meet her again—his determination was singular. While Miss Gaen was dismissive, it did make some sense.

If we went with our magnetic theory to explain why he was roused, the same thing should have happened in the world of eleven years ago that we visited the other day, traveling through time. After all, if we went back and looked at the timeline, that was when Shinobu visited that spot for the “first” time.

It didn’t happen in the world of eleven years ago because only four

years had passed since the ashes arrived in the air pocket, and he couldn't even subconsciously recognize Shinobu… Shouldn't that be how I looked at it? Shinobu then used up all the aberrational materials in that location, which is why the First never returned in that timeline…

But would Miss Gaen overlook something that even I noticed?

"Surprised, Sir Araragi? That I wish to issue an apology to Kissshot?"

"Not surprised as much as it just sounds like a lie to me. In fact, you've already sent an assassin Shinobu's way—that mockery of a monkey aberration."

"That was an assassin sent thy way—just as the mockery of a snail aberration was. Just a bit of harassment of my junior… But do not worry. I shall dispatch no further mockeries now that I have seen the sign and seal on thy face. To thee, of course, or to Kissshot."

"It just sounds to me like you're trying to talk your way into getting close to Shinobu so you can get your revenge."

"Revenge? Revenge for what? What reason do I have to resent her? Ye who call her a name such as Shinobu?"

"Yes, you do have a reason. Don't try to gloss over it by calling it a misguided moment. You said some awful things to Shinobu."

"None more awful than calling her Shinobu, in my eyes—but such fruitless arguments aside, indeed, I cannot deny that. Thus I wish to apologize. I wish to meet her myself and apologize."

"Meet her yourself? Wait, so are you asking me to put you two in contact?"

"I shall say nothing of the sort. I do not expect thee to mediate between us. All I need from thee is thy separation from Kissshot."

She needs only one thrall, the boy Aberration Slayer said to me—with determination.

“I can become Kissshot’s right arm—while ye could become nothing more than her shackles. Am I mistaken? Have ye once protected her?”

“What about you? You tried to kill her. And even that enchanted blade you said to return… If you go all the way back, you made that sword to kill her, didn’t you?”

“Indeed I did. That imitation is a great sword created for the sole purpose of killing her—made with my flesh and blood, my body and bones. I cannot deny that either—but have ye never tried to kill her thyself? I was under the belief that we shared this one thing in common, but am I mistaken? Do ye wish for me not to treat us as similar?”

“You’re surprisingly talkative,” I said. “I imagined you to be more of the reserved type. Like the way you were in that armor.”

“I could no longer keep my silence. Though for the time being, one may say I’ve been pulled into speaking by this tiny appearance of mine… Sir Araragi. Thou once tried to kill Kissshot thyself—but now ye have reconciled, have ye not? Do ye find it audacious that I wish to do the same?”

“…”

“She brought me back from the brink of death. Though I may have flipped out at the time, I am now grateful—are such words that strange to hear?”

I did find it strange to hear him say flipped out, but he wasn’t wrong as a whole. It felt like we’d said and done the exact same things.

But while I couldn’t deny his words, whether or not I could affirm them was a different question until I had a clearer view.

Yes, he might be right, we had that in common, but we could hardly contradict each other more regarding everything else.

Call me petty, a shortcoming I recognize myself, but I wouldn’t be the only person to feel displeased, or as the boy Aberration Slayer

might say, like flipping the hell out, upon being told to step aside.

I don't have the kind of integrity required to reply with a quick is that so and a nod.

Even if logically.

I thought he was right.

"Do ye not wish to leave her? Though anyone could replace thee, I could be replaced by none. For I am special. I am a chosen human."

"I love that. I wish I could say that kind of thing even once in my life—not that I'd ever be able to, given how flippant I'd sound."

"Hahaha. No, Second, I have not taken such offense," the boy Aberration Slayer said with lighthearted affectation.

I didn't understand what this reply meant for a moment, but then I realized he probably thought flippant was the adjective form of flip out.

…His self-claimed omnipotence had its limits.

I felt just a little more like I might be able to debate him on even ground—he may have been the first Aberration Slayer, but he wasn't faultless like Hanekawa.

If anything, the way he awkwardly tried to introduce modern words into our conversation felt like an attempt to vie against me, someone from four hundred years in the future.

That's right.

He was—just as serious about this as me.

On an edge just as sharp as a katana.

"Thou saved Kissshot—ye happened upon her in a time of crisis and saved her. But wouldn't anyone do the same and save a beautiful woman collapsed and on the brink of death?"

“…”

“’Tis something anyone could do, and something that could happen to anyone—a common occurrence that could happen anywhere in Japan. In that case, why not switch places with me? No…” He shook his head. “I suppose there is no point in confronting one another with our flaws and weaknesses so. What good would it serve for us to argue—’twould be nothing more than an unseemly civil war. For in the end, this is a case of two men fighting over a woman—I see everything about thee as flawed, while thou must see everything about me as flawed. They say that not even dogs dare to interrupt a quarrel between lovers. Not even an aberration would think to bother with a quarrel between slaves.”

What good would it do to demonstrate to one another our slavishness, the boy Aberration Slayer said, before clapping and taking the cap off his plastic bottle.

He’d said something earlier along the lines of being more talkative because he had a boy’s body, but knowing when to pause for breath at just the right time suggested that he was never a poor speaker to begin with.

“In that case, what should we do? Just start praising each other?” I asked as I waited for him to take the bottle away from his mouth.

“Now, that would be unseemly,” he answered—sensibly. “So allow me to present the benefits. Sir Araragi, I shall inform thee of all the wonderful things that would befall thee were ye to leave Kissshot—as I do, think of what wonderful things would befall me if ye did not.”

“B-Benefits? Wonderful things?”

The words felt completely out of place and ill-timed—like they ran counter to our situation. Was this that kind of negotiation?

“’Tis not a negotiation. I will merely explain to thee in a kind and meticulous manner those things thou must not understand. That ye will be freed were ye to leave Kissshot—that ye will be untied from those knots named Kissshot. That ye can be free from the way ye

two are entwined and bound to one another. In other words, my proposal is nothing short of an offer to assume thy burdensome responsibility to her. I see the impressive settlement thou hast come to regarding Kissshot. It seems laudable from an expert's perspective—I know not who wrought it, but 'tis superb. Yet 'tis not as if ye pay no cost to maintain it. Thou must live a warped life—and I am offering to take over this distortion that has come to thee."

"Everything, then?" I answered cautiously—no matter what he said, I couldn't afford to speak thoughtlessly. The conversation between the First and the Second had indeed entered this sort of phase. "You're saying—you want to replace everything about me?"

"From my perspective, 'twas thee who replaced everything about me. Ye—took over my place. All I want is to have it back—my sword and my position. I could become thee, but thou could never become me."

"…"

"Or do ye claim to be capable of better serving Kissshot? An amateur—better than I, an expert? Thou must realize I do not intend to slight thee, one who stayed by Kissshot's side while I was gone. Or to be more frank, I do not wish to hurt thee, one who must be important to her in his own way."

"I gave her your message," I said in a low voice.

Her reply was the one piece of evidence that might allow me to stand against the boy Aberration Slayer.

"It sounds like—she has no interest in seeing you."

"Is that so. Well, surely 'tis so."

He didn't seem affected—as if he'd all but expected my response. As if he saw straight through anything Shinobu might say…

"But whatever Kissshot's intentions may be, I must have her return to me what I have lent her."

My sword, and my position.

He almost sounded like a bill collector.

“I wish to bloom a second time. I wish to shine once more after four hundred years. I do not see this as shameful—if anything, is not thy grasping at thy position of Second shameful?”

“Are you sure it’s not as a human you want to bloom a second time? A thrall to Shinobu? Even if it isn’t for revenge, aren’t you trying to meet her so you could return to being a human?”

“I cannot return to being a human,” the First shot me down. “It has been four hundred years, after all—too much time has passed. We two are different from that perspective as well. But…I no longer consider this a tragedy. ’Tis because ’tis too late for me that I wish to stay forever, semi-eternally with Kissshot.”

“You might see that as true love or something, but these days…we call people like you stalkers.”

Hm?

Something felt strange about this line coming from me—why? What felt unnatural just now? No, maybe not unnatural, but a strange concordance—

“As I said before, let us not give ourselves to disparaging one another. More importantly, did ye think of something? What great things will come to me if ye refuse to leave Kissshot?”

If I stayed with Kissshot.

Remained with Kissshot—

“…”

I of course couldn’t come up with a thing—I couldn’t come up with a single thing, and so to stall for time, I twisted the cap to the bottle of tea I’d been given. This was my relationship with Shinobu: something that made everyone unhappy, that brought despair to all with no survivors. I’d drink the tea—but I’d never come up with any

idea. I just wanted to escape being chased down and cornered by the boy Aberration Slayer. I took the bottle, and as if I were dodging my right to answer him, I put it to my mouth.

My mouth.

I put it, put it□

"?!"

I couldn't put it anywhere.

It disintegrated.

I leapt back in surprise.

A silver something passed in front of my eyes at an incredible speed□and in the blink of an eye, smashed the bottle in my hands, contents and all.

It was crushed into dust□pulverized.

But neither a fragment of the bottle nor a drop of its contents fell on me. I'd lamely flopped over onto my butt before they could.

It wasn't that I'd reflexively bent backwards. I was more like… blown back by the violent wind pressure of an object passing before me at a terribly high speed.

Of course, the boy Aberration Slayer intentionally and immediately hopped up and back to avoid□it.

It□being a massive silver cross.

That's what he evaded.

The cross stood in the ground of the empty lot, buried deep like some sort of grave marker. This wasn't my first time seeing the impossibly large silver item. I recognized it.

This striking item that vampires would be weak to□

A vampire hunter's weapon.

“What the hell are you doing, drinking something an enemy gives you without a second thought? And I still saved you despite how much of an idiot you are—just how peaceful of a life do you lead, anyway? Even with your link cut the way it is now, you wouldn’t last a second if you drank holy water…”

There he stood—golden hair and golden eyes.

A young man in a white traditional school uniform.

“Gotta love it.”

024

Episode.

One of three vampire hunters who'd traveled to Japan during spring break to chase after the legendary vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade and kill her.

A half-vampire youth with the characteristics of both a vampire and a human.

Opposed to both vampires and humans—he hated vampires and resented humans.

Neither vampire nor human, and moved not by duty or work.

A professional who had his private reasons.

This bellicose expert vampire slayer with his offensive fighting style had once battled me too, back when I became the thrall of the legendary vampire—or maybe you should just say he made a fool of me, but in the end, thanks both to Mèmè Oshino's wits and Tsubasa Hanekawa's tact, he returned to his motherland empty-handed, or at least he should have…so why was he here?

To save me?

Is that why he threw that cross?

At the plastic bottle containing—holy water?

"It appears as though an obstacle has presented itself, Sir Araragi," the boy Aberration Slayer said as he backed up—with only walls behind him and Episode standing at the entrance, we were in something like a dead end. "This issue would have been settled quickly had ye quaffed thy chalice more holy than poisoned—nor would I have ignored that sign and seal had ye purified thyself of

your own volition.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying at first…but it seemed there was some sort of trick to the tea he’d handed me. So he lied about buying it at a vending machine?

Had I tasted its contents, unable to stand any more of our weighty conversation—something inconvenient would’ve happened to my body, though I wasn’t sure exactly what.

Something the boy Aberration Slayer would find convenient—my parting ways with Shinobu, for example?

Had the boy been plotting to assassinate me, hiding every bit of his hostility?

The animosity this implied chilled my spine.

So the whole time we spoke—he was waiting with greedy eyes for me to fall into his trap? He was eagerly waiting for me to drink holy water?

No—maybe it was ardor, not animosity.

That—was the kind of fervor he held for Shinobu.

As I worried and shilly-shallied, he moved with purpose to accomplish his goal…

“Kehehehehe—gotta love it. Don’t be mad, thrall of Heartunderblade—anything goes when it comes to slaying aberrations. Sneak attacks, surprise attacks, they’re all acceptable moves,” Episode, the individual apparently responsible for saving me from this pinch, said—but no, I shouldn’t use a word as uncertain as apparently. It was clear that he had saved me.

If he hadn’t hurtled the massive object, itself purified—an oversized cross many times bigger than its wielder.

Surely I would have ingested that liquid, just as the boy Aberration Slayer wished—but I couldn’t immediately accept the reality that I’d been saved by Episode. After all, he’d been such a pain to both me

and Shinobu over spring break—wasn't his cross a weapon meant to kill, not save me?

The cross sticking out of the ground instilled far greater fear in me than any plastic bottle— despite having been told of its dangerous contents.

The cross's owner, too…

Anyone could see that I'd been rescued here, but I only felt like a new enemy had appeared.

Why was he here?

I couldn't stop myself from wondering.

My doubts may have been shared.

"Art thou a modern expert? So then, have ye come here to slay me?" the boy Aberration Slayer asked coolly.

"Hard to say. You seem more like an expert than a vampire to me right now, but I wonder if that's going to change once it's night," Episode replied. "In that case, I could always just kill you to the point that there's not even any fallout left."

Episode sounded far more heated talking to the boy Aberration Slayer, but his glare seemed to be pointed my way as well.

Of course.

From his point of view, the boy Aberration Slayer and I were birds of a feather.

"Allow me to clarify. I had no intent of a sneak or surprise attack—this too was an act of harassment delivered in place of a proper greeting. Anyone with the slightest amount of expert knowledge should have been able to notice it was holy water. How surprised I was to learn that an amateur ignorant to that degree stood close to Kissshot."

"Yeah, well, you look pretty amateurish to me yourself, trying to

slay an aberration with a four-hundred-year-old move as pious as that—gotta love it.”

“…”

I couldn’t grasp what was going on here. Forget words, I was at a loss for letters. But then, as if to follow up—

“Well, good. Looks like I managed to make it in time. Nice to meet ya, little buddy First,” the voice said, so cheerful it seemed out of place as it interrupted the three-way stalemate between me, Episode, and the boy Aberration Slayer—it belonged to Miss Gaen.

Fiddling with her cell phone, she made her appearance from behind Episode with light steps—I never thought I’d feel relieved to see her, of all people, but now it finally made sense.

Ah—so the “helper” Miss Gaen left the mountain to go and meet was Episode, the vampire hunter.

He did fight vampires, now that I thought about it.

Calling over an expert in vampire slaying was almost too by-the-book a move—and Episode?

He must’ve been the only one available…and hold on, did that mean she gave Miss Kagenui an even wider berth than him?

“You took forever, Miss Gaen,” Episode said.

“Real sorry about that,” she amiably apologized. “But you know, ’Sode, you’re to blame here too. I wish you wouldn’t put it all on me. You spent so much time having fun hitting on girls that you were almost late.”

“Again, I wasn’t hitting on anyone… Just how old do you think I am?”

This back-and-forth made it seem as though they’d met before. Well, if Miss Gaen was the big boss they said she was, maybe it wasn’t so strange that she had international connections…

Unsurprised by the boy Aberration Slayer's appearance, Miss Gaen turned to him. "I am Izuko Gaen. I'm the lady who knows everything," she gave her full and proper name—or maybe not. There was no guarantee it was her real name, when I thought about it. "I'm here to negotiate with you," she said.

"I must admit, I am at a disadvantage."

'Tis still daytime, the boy Aberration Slayer laughed.

Not a comfortable laugh, but it did hint at his enthusiasm for the situation—perhaps it was far more of a real challenge than the one he was in until moments ago, when he faced off against a foolish, cowardly high school student.

"Sir Araragi. It appears as though our discussion ends here—so I ask for thy forgiveness. We could not discover a middle ground. As such, our relationship must move to the next stage."

"You call that a discussion?"

He had some nerve, after trying to trick me.

But wait, the next stage? What did that mean…

"What else? A duel," he said. Like it was part of a procedure. "Two men battling over a woman—a tradition that has stayed unchanged for four hundred years."

"…"

"Let us have a bloodbath this night," the boy Aberration Slayer declared. "I leave the detailed arrangements to thy camp of experts—Lady Izuko…was it? Do as ye wish. I shall visit thy location after having made my preparations. I shall do my best to make a full recovery by then—and be fully restored. Thou ought to erase that sign and seal on thy face, Sir Araragi. I shall neither run nor hide, but ye may do either if ye wish."

If ye will accept this duel, do not fail to say thy final farewell to Kissshot—he advised before turning his heels.

With Episode and Miss Gaen shutting down the entrance, he should've been trapped in the empty lot, but that was a two-dimensional way of looking at things.

He flew into the air—jumped.

As if he'd used Ononoki's Unlimited Rulebook. I've also heard that once upon a time, a certain legendary vampire needed to jump with only one leg to fly from Japan to the South Pole.

His feat was nowhere near that—but the boy Aberration Slayer, notwithstanding his incomplete recovery, jumped in a way that didn't seem possible with the sun still shining. He easily cleared any walls built to block humans.

"A—"

Are you going to run, you coward, I began to say, before swallowing the words—he said he wouldn't run or hide. I, relieved that he'd left this place and my sight, was the coward and the chicken here.

I wouldn't have to speak to him anymore.

I didn't have to face him—and that gave me peace of mind.

Even facing my smallness as a man felt easier in comparison—that's how much calmer I felt.

But forget about me. What about the two experts who'd just appeared—why weren't Episode and Miss Gaen chasing after him? Unlike me, they had no reason to watch him run away—this was Miss Gaen's chance to get her hands on the first Aberration Slayer during the day, probably an unexpected twist.

Why didn't they give chase? And couldn't they have kept the boy Aberration Slayer from jumping in the first place? Taking away his ability to take to the skies—did they realize it almost looked like they wanted him to run away?

"Oh."

But once he was no longer visible in the sky, I turned around to Miss Gaen and Episode—which dispelled my doubts. It's not that they didn't chase after him, they couldn't—they had no choice but to stop.

When Episode threw his massive silver cross to shatter my plastic bottle, and the pressure of the wind pushed me back, I somehow dodged its destruction—but I'd ended up tossing the plastic bag I held in my hand opposite the one holding the bottle. Maybe the tape on it was weak, but the contents had spilled out onto the ground where it landed—down to even the receipt.

The situation called for Miss Gaen and Episode to give chase after the flying first Aberration Slayer, and their highly professional, instant judgment moved them to do so, but they'd been nailed to the ground by the items scattered at their would-be point of departure.

Nailed to the ground.

Nailed by the four volumes that had spilled from the plastic bag—each of them taking two and freezing as if they couldn't believe their own eyes.

Episode, the half-vampire expert, held both volumes of The Savage Garçon Huffs and Puffs and Blows the Half-Boy Down!—while Izuko Gaen held the two cougar photo books featuring a woman with a fashion sense obviously like hers.

They both stood there, frozen, a volume in each hand.

"N-No, you've got it all wrong!"

They were mostly right.

And thus, the Aberration Slayer—first thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—eluded capture once again.

025

After I finished my exchange with the two pallid experts that was, in a sense, far more intense and arcane than my discussion with the boy Aberration Slayer (“Listen, Araragi (her name for me having gotten more distant), this freaks me out even more than you think it does, so please, just stop.” “I don’t love this at all.”), I returned alone to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—Miss Gaen and Episode went off on their own to “start on the formalities” (I hope it’s not that they decided to avoid me).

Mentally and physically drained after my sudden succession of diverse ordeals, I held the plastic bag like a treasure as I arrived at the shrine—where I found yet another, a further ordeal.

“What…”

The little girl had pushed the athlete to the ground and was holding her there.

Within the shrine premises, of all the sacrilegious things you could do.

Shinobu Oshino straddled Suruga Kanbaru’s supine torso—whaaaat?!

What happened? What’s going on?!

What were they getting into there on the other side of the shrine gate?!

It’d be one thing if it was Kanbaru straddling Shinobu, but Shinobu straddling Kanbaru? Strike that—maybe she was just addled?!

Could that talk last night about beautiful girls taking the lead have been foreshadowing?!

I ran over to join in, sorry, no, to question them, but someone grabbed my arm and pulled me into the bushes—with enough strength that I could put up no resistance.

“Shh, monstieur,” a voice said.

Just as I expected, Ononoki had been the one to tug on my hand—she was there in the bush, squatting. At first I was shocked that she’d managed to conceal her presence so close by, but then again, she was small to begin with, so I guess you wouldn’t be able to find her if she crouched down with her hands around her knees…

Not to mention, she gave off no signs of life.

“O-Ononoki.”

“Onthelowkey is fine.”

“Who’s that? No, really. You’re Ononoki, I’m sure of it.”

Could she please stop her character from changing every time we spent a half-day apart?

Still, I’d been reunited with an unexpected presence in an unexpected place—though she’d been protecting me indirectly ever since the fire through the stamp on my face.

How could I not be happy?

I leapt on her.

“Hugs!”

“Dodges.”

She evaded me—it seemed she wasn’t going to let me have my way with her.

Not only did she get out of the way of my beetle-horn hands with nimble movements while sitting, she used her back to scoop my legs out from under me, a beautiful trip—then made me sit, as if to fold

me away.

Around the middle of that month, Miss Kagenui had folded my entire body up as if she were using some storage technique, and it seemed that her shikigami could do something similar, unsurprisingly enough□okay, maybe it was a surprise.

Considering how much power Ononoki, someone capable of literal death blows, had, how could I ever hope to manage her if she started using these kinds of aikido or judo-like moves?

I'd never be able to hug her again!

"Don't assume you can hug me to begin with. I'll prune you."

"Prune me? Oh god."

"I told you shh, didn't I? Shut your mouth, moron."

An order□I really couldn't get a grasp on what kind of character she was.

Knowing how she acted, she probably flew all around after we last met. Judging by the boy Aberration Slayer's words, her search was unfortunately fruitless, at least on an immediate level… Had she come here to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to meet with Miss Gaen?

If I tried writing Ononoki's movements out on a timeline, I guess it would go in the order of "Saved me and Kanbaru (cram school ruins)" → "Gave report to Miss Gaen (via phone)" → "Fought the monkey with Shinobu (teaches her about that park)" → "Also goes to said park herself (learns that the meeting spot has changed)" → "Kita-Shirahebi Shrine (the present)"□I guess?

Really, what a hard-working shikigami…

I recalled how much of this busy, ever-moving girl's time I'd taken up, buying her nothing more than ice cream, and felt a little bad.

"It seems like you made your way out of a pretty tough battle yourself, monstieur□your clothes are in tatters."

“Oh, no, this is Kanbaru’s…”

Well, the track jacket aside, I had indeed made it through a tough battle last night. I’d also experienced a fight with few parallels in history…

“If we’re going to talk about tattered clothes, though, what about you, Ononoki?”

“These aren’t in tatters. What are you trying to get by having me expose my skin? It seems like a lot has happened to you, monstieur, but I can ask you that later. More importantly, look over there.”

Ononoki pointed.

At Shinobu and Kanbaru, tangled up on the shrine grounds—I described Shinobu as straddling Kanbaru, but it looked more like a martial arts mount.

So Shinobu had Kanbaru locked down solid? Like beetle-horn legs, as opposed to my beetle-horn arms? But why was Shinobu doing it to Kanbaru? Were it the opposite, it’d feel amazing, like two puzzle pieces snapping right in.

“Let’s go over and sneak a peep at that.”

“Sneak a peep…”

Now that I thought about it, hadn’t she done the same the other day when Shinobu and I were talking? Hadn’t she been straining her ears to listen to Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade talk about the olden days?

I’d inadvertently convinced myself she was the fighting type, given how we first met, but maybe she was more of the type to run investigations, or rather, eavesdropping operations—though she wasn’t running anything right now, sitting here.

“That’s right. External affairs is my line of expertise.”

“You might be able to run investigations, but you’d never be able to do external affairs.”

“Why do you say that when I’ve forged such a strong relationship with you, monstieur?”

“No, I’m sorry, but the only reason we’ve forged a strong relationship is that I’m a pro when it comes to tween girls. Your communication skills are pretty rough, you know.”

“What does that even mean, a pro when it comes to tween girls? Look.”

The aberrational professional pointed at Shinobu and Kanbaru again.

For this girl, pointing was almost like setting a missile’s targeting. Part of me felt nervous, knowing that two close friends were on the other side of it…

“They were like that when I got here.”

“They were?”

That would mean Ononoki arrived at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine only a few moments ago. So she didn’t know why they looked like that, either…which is why she was watching them from afar?

“Wait, no. I can’t agree with this, Ononoki. How are you ever going to move forward if you’re always just watching people get it on like this? You’ve got to be assertive and climb to the next stage yourself.”

“Speak for yourself, monstieur. I’m not spying on them for any vulgar reason. It seems there’s some sort of affair going on.”

“An affair…”

Like a romantic one?

But looking at them again, assuming that’s not what she meant there did seem to be some sort of intensity emanating from them.

Almost as if they were arguing…

Arguing?

Shinobu?

That didn't make sense—Shinobu barely acknowledged most other humans, nor did she speak to them, let alone get into a fight with them.

As far as I knew, there was spring break, when she spoke with Mèmè Oshino, an expert (it'd be hard to call her interaction with Tsubasa Hanekawa a proper conversation), the time the other day when she inserted herself between me and Miss Kagenui and spoke to her—and this time, when she spoke to Miss Gaen after being provoked. As far as I knew, that was it.

So why would she, a former noble vampire, dregs or not, an aberration with a lofty spirit and mind, be talking like that with Kanbaru?

And—arguing?

It almost seemed more like a verbal dispute than an argument, practically a verbal conflict—but a verbal conflict with someone you have in a front mount is about as far as a war of words could go, no?

Anything past that and you just have to scrap it out.

No, hold on. Don't make any panicked judgments, Kanbaru's involved here, should I just assume this is some sort of kink of hers? Still…

"It's no good. I can't make out anything they're saying. They're too far. If only they'd yell at each other louder," I said.

"They'd already be trading punches if they were yelling any louder."

"Can you hear them, Ononoki?"

"Of course. External affairs is my specialty."

“…”

Did she have an attachment to that title or something?

To be fair, it was some sort of affair, and it was taking place outside…

As a shikigami, Ononoki’s sight and hearing must far surpass an average human’s… Now that my link to Shinobu had been cut, I couldn’t so much as read my partner’s lips.

Dammit, unable to read her lips?

I was bringing dishonor to the name Koyomi Araragi!

“Can’t we get a little closer to them, Ononoki? Close enough that I can hear a bit of what they’re saying…”

“Oh, so you’re all about this too, monstieur? Just look at you… You just love it when people fight, don’t you?”

“Wait… What do you mean, look at me?”

If I was all about this, that made Ononoki too much about this.

Her staying expressionless the whole time made it that much better.

“No, I want to stop them. This looks like it’s going in a bad direction… It’s just.”

It’s just.

It was just too inscrutable, too bizarre a matchup on a fight card that it made me hesitate, if I’m being honest if they were arguing, I wanted to know the circumstances before I tried to mediate… Not that I had the luxury of saying that if they were about to break into a brawl.

I would have to stop them at any cost if it were Kanbaru on top of Shinobu, but with the positions reversed…

With our link weakened along with Shinobu’s lessened vampirism,

Kanbaru was basically just romping around with a little girl, even if they were tangled up□but Kanbaru knew that Shinobu was the shadow of a vampire. Daring to argue with one was a keen reminder of Kanbaru's iron nerves□but what could they be arguing about?

What could get her that heated?

I couldn't imagine. Maybe they got into it over a BL ship or something… It wasn't too serious if it was for a stupid reason, but… I still wanted to get close enough to hear them so that I could know more.

"You want to move. Hm…" Ononoki nodded. "Using my Unlimited Rulebook?"

"Why would I want to use a method that'd attract as much attention as that one? We don't want them noticing."

"Maybe you should try a please."

"…Please."

"Hm. What should we do," Ononoki said, seeming to think as she crossed her arms□did she realize that Kanbaru and Shinobu's conversation was going to end before ours at this rate?

"Your request isn't very convincing. It feels like you're just saying that."

"What do you mean, not convincing…"

"I wouldn't mind moving you if you did something amusing."

"You're being ridiculous now."

"Also, don't you think it's about time for you to thank me for protecting me with that mark I put on you, monstieur?"

"…"

She now demanded my thanks.

Don’t get me wrong, I felt grateful, but I thought this was one of those situations where you didn’t have to say it out loud… Wasn’t she planning on keeping quiet about it? She seemed like the kind of girl who’d go, “What are you even talking about?” if I thanked her in an awkward way, but no, she was apparently more assertive than that.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be right now, monstieur. Promise me to do something amusing later, and I’ll guide you to the best seat in the house.”

“The best seat in the house?”

“Front-row tickets.”

“They’d notice.”

No matter how serious the problem fueling their quarrel, those two would stop if we went and watched them from that close.

“Okay, fine. I promise. I’ll do something super amusing next time.”

If there was a next time…

Ononoki took on a strange personality in response to my promise. “Hmm, I dunno, your idea of amusing always involves the dirtiest jokes… You’re the type who thinks all you have to do to amuse someone is take off your clothes.” (Seriously, what happened to her over the last twelve hours?) Only her face stayed expressionless, but then she pulled my sleeve.

“This way.”

I know I’ve been describing her as emotionless and expressionless this whole time, but at this point I started to wonder if maybe she was only expressionless, and in fact overflowing with emotion□but in any case, she continued to tug me while I followed her with stealthy steps.

She may not have been external affairs, but she must have surveyed all of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. She led me straight to the best seat in the house as if we were walking through her backyard.

I could just barely hear their voices and just barely see their expressions, plus we were hidden in bushes, making it hard for them to notice—it must have been just as good as our previous spot for Ononoki, with her apparently sharp senses, but it was on another level for me in my current, human mode.

"…"

From the tone of the voices I now heard—and from the expressions I now saw, I was able to count out the possibility that they were fighting over something pointless and stupid.

The two were arguing.

Genuinely—and seriously.

"Monstieur, I've been wondering, what exactly is in those dirty books in that plastic bag you've been holding like some sort of treasure this whole time?"

"It sounds like you already know, you just said that they're dirty books."

"Well, the bag is strangely transparent. At least, to eyes like mine. Still, I never knew you were well-versed in the ways of boys' love. That seems a little too broad-minded to me."

"No, you don't understand. This isn't me trying to show how broad-minded I am. I bought these because Kanbaru asked me to…"

I recalled the earlier trouble this got me into—then realized something.

Kanbaru had asked me to pick something else up while I was out shopping—and hold on, why would she ask me, her senior, to pick up something extra while I was out shopping in her place to begin with? You could chalk it up to shamelessness, sure, and that's why I didn't find it odd until this moment, but…

What about that?

Was asking me to pick something else up a way of delaying my

return? To give her more time to speak with Shinobu alone?

She couldn't have predicted that I'd encounter the boy Aberration Slayer at the bookstore, of course… But could Suruga Kanbaru have wanted to speak to Shinobu Oshino□in as frank of a manner as I spoke to the boy Aberration Slayer?

But the discussion, or rather, the argument the two girls were having seemed to be a fruitless one. Although I could hear them from my current distance, it was hard to pick out each exact thing they said□they both seemed to have gotten pretty emotional.

Ononoki was staring at the two, but could she really hear them?

"Hey, Ononoki… I have a request."

"Didn't I tell you to be quiet, you living interruption? If you're not going to be reasonable, I'm going to have to shut you up with a kiss."

Really?

Ononoki's character was changing from one moment to the next, but who ever taught her that one?

I'd wanted to ask her to translate the exchange for me, but that now seemed difficult□fieldwork may have been her job, but to me she just looked like a dedicated rubbernecker.

But then.

The heated argument between the two finally seemed to reach a stopping point□the conversation between Kanbaru and Shinobu paused for a moment.

It was like one of those fleeting silences that suddenly descend on a noisy classroom□we'd be liable to erupt in laughter next had this been a classroom, but of course, that didn't happen.

Kanbaru looked up at Shinobu, her lips firm□while Shinobu looked down at Kanbaru, baring her fangs as if to gnash her teeth.

They'd stopped trying to shout each other down—were they trying to stare each other down now?

I was prepared to jump in at any moment, expecting them to beat each other down next—but then.

Shinobu spoke.

"Listen."

Her voice deeper than before—calmer than before.

"I recognize thy courage—I see from thy recklessness, not ceding a single step to me, that thou art indeed my master's junior. So rather than grow emotional, I shall indulge this child before me, as an adult who has lived for five centuries—take back thy prior statement and I would be willing to act as though this interaction never occurred."

Apologize, and I shall forgive thee, Shinobu said.

She hadn't spoken in such a menacing voice in a while. It made me go from being prepared to leap out to cowering.

I was just trembling, but Ononoki seemed to overestimate me, thinking that I was getting ready to intervene.

"Calm down, monstieur," she said, taking my hand.

She really was quick to initiate physical contact with me. Maybe she's in love with me, I thought. She continued:

"A fight between girls isn't a boy's business."

A fight between girls?

This clearly went beyond that. The weak of heart could die on the spot if Shinobu pressured them in that manner. Couldn't Ononoki see it? That was what it meant for someone's gaze to pierce like a dagger—but the person in whose direction that dagger pointed.

Suruga Kanbaru.

Her mental fortitude could not be pierced that easily—as far as her spirit went, it could put some aberrations to shame, as far as I knew.

“I won’t take it back. I won’t apologize. I’ll say it again and again.”

Kanbaru sounded calmer, too—thanks to all the preceding, frenetic screaming and shouting? If this was how girls fought, Ononoki was right. No boy had any business trying to get in the way of that.

“Shinobu. You—ought to meet him.”

A line that she’d most likely repeated over and over—Kanbaru said it again.

“You ought to meet the first Aberration Slayer.”

026

Whap.

Shinobu's hand moved to grab Kanbaru's face.

It looked like she was using the Iron Claw—Shinobu seemed to launch another attack from the mount position upon the face-up girl she straddled, Kanbaru.

That said, it seemed the Iron Claw was only meant to threaten, with no strength put into her fingers—touching Kanbaru's face more than grabbing.

Still, how could anyone stay still with this sham of a vampire's hand on her face? Shinobu had enough grip strength to crush a snake aberration. Of course, a snake's head wasn't the same as a human head, but it was probably like having your head patted by a bear.

I thought I could hear Kanbaru gulp.

And yet she didn't retreat.

She didn't retreat.

"You're trying to avoid ever having to meet your former partner, who spent four hundred years coming back to life—that's not good. It's not good at all."

That's.

Not right—Kanbaru said.

"…"

I found myself gulping as well—so that's what Kanbaru wanted to talk to Shinobu about while I was gone? I had no way of knowing

how she broached the topic, but given that she'd ended up pinned to the ground, she probably hadn't done so in a very good way.

No.

She absolutely hadn't broached the topic in a good way.

She would have been direct, her words loud, clear, and unconsidered when there may have been better ones to use.

You're wrong. It isn't right.

She must have said those kinds of things—and even if she did know what kind of explosion of anger those honest words would invite, she wouldn't have said it any other way.

Suruga Kanbaru.

She continued, still refusing to choose her words carefully.

"An adult for five centuries? Really? Seems to me you're nothing more than a coward who keeps running away, refusing to face her past." She said the words clearly. Her face still pressed down upon. "You told me to apologize—but don't you have someone you need to apologize to, if anything?"

"I haven't a clue as to what thou may speak of. I cannot make sense of it—'tis incomprehensible. I had seen from within my master's shadow that derangement is thy standard state of mind, but it seems thou hast exceeded even that."

So Shinobu agreed that there was something wrong with Kanbaru's head… That was plenty on its own, but right now I also shared Shinobu's inability to understand what Kanbaru was trying to say.

She needed to meet the first Aberration Slayer.

And—apologize to him?

Is that what she was saying? I recalled my conversation in the empty lot with the boy Aberration Slayer. He said something—about wanting to apologize to Shinobu.

He wanted to meet her in order to apologize.

I couldn't gauge just how much he meant it, and even if he was telling the truth, part of me felt it'd be a little selfish to want something like that after all this time—yet Kanbaru now said the total opposite to Shinobu.

Meet him and apologize to him—what made Kanbaru feel like she needed to say that?

"I know better than anyone that I'm messed up in the head."

So she was aware of it…

"But that has nothing to do with this—I still know you're in the wrong, even with a messed-up head."

"And I've been asking thee all this time where I've gone wrong—I don't understand a lick of it. If a lowly human such as thee wishes to deliver a sermon to me, at least speak in a somewhat logical manner."

"To hell with logic!" Kanbaru screamed again.

It almost looked like she was eating Shinobu's palm when she screamed with her face pressed down—and Shinobu didn't move her hand away, either.

Depending on how you saw it, they painted a very surreal picture.

Ononoki might have smiled if she could form expressions—but this was as serious as could be for the two involved.

"Stop whining and just meet him! We're talking about a guy who spent four hundred years returning all in order to meet you—so why won't you do that for him?!"

"And again, that is where thy misunderstanding lies—'tis not as if he returned for any reason as trifling and emotional as that. 'Tis mere vitality, merely a natural phenomenon. No different from the arrival of the summer and the winter, the pouring of rain, the crashing of the waves, the day turning to night turning to day again. A natural

phenomenon, where scattered ashes were gathered once more by the wind and excited in the way a magnet would be."

"Sure, but it's natural for someone to fall in love!" yelled Kanbaru. "Don't you dare deny someone's feelings of being in love with you!"

"Again… How incomprehensible ye are!" Low until now, Shinobu's voice also began to rise. "Just what kind of disposition doth thou possess? Stop trying to measure the world by thy own standards! That is not the nature of a vampire thrall□a vampire's relationship of master and servant! 'Tis not a matter of love and love not, ye□romantic rotbrain!"

Romantic rotbrain.

The words were strong enough to potentially end the argument, but Kanbaru still didn't fall back□she persisted in the same fraught tone.

"Your master and servant relationship isn't about love and love not? Is that□something you'd be able to say to Araragi-senpai's face?"

"…"

Shinobu fell silent.

She went from enraged to quiet.

While we weren't face to face, I was directly to the side of hers. But Shinobu couldn't have gone quiet because she knew that.

Had we been linked, I could never escape notice at this distance, no matter how expert a job I did at hiding…

How ironic. I'd come into contact with Shinobu's feelings like this precisely because our link had been severed.

"Hmph. And so ye created such an opportunity for the two of us to be alone? Ah, but now that I mention it, something about ye did appear strange when I said to my master I'd no intention of meeting that thrall… And so ye had him buy books and brassieres and whatnot?"

“No, that doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

…Apparently it didn’t.

“I really just wanted him to buy those for me. If I’m being honest with you, I regret not putting more emphasis on the bra—I’m concerned now that he’ll treat it as some kind of joke and not buy one. My chest really hurts after all that moving I did just now. My breasts can’t keep up with my speed. I thought they might get torn off at the root.”

“Thy movements were indeed dynamic…”

“By the way, back when I played basketball, there was this one team we used to face off against called the Commandos, but I could never quite focus during those games.”

“Well, it seems thou art underprepared once more as far as underwear.”

“Indeed. I’d never be down on the ground like this if I’d worn a bra… Though it’s really easy to just have to lie here like this. It’s like I’ve been freed from gravity.”

“Hmph. A concern I do not share as I am now,” Shinobu said, seemingly annoyed.

As far as I could surmise, the beating-each-other-down portion of their conversation was behind them—you’d think the situation would start with them trying to talk each other down, then proceed to shout- ing each other down, then beating each other down, but it seemed that fights between girls followed the opposite path.

In other words, a beatdown, then the shouting down—and then, at last, they talked each other down.

Okay, it’d be disrespectful to girls around the country if I took anything Shinobu Oshino and Suruga Kanbaru did as representative, but still.

Just as I thought during our encounters with the armored warrior and the monkey-crab-snake, Kanbaru was so quick to act—she must

have gone straight into this per usual, as soon as I started down the mountain to go shopping. An opportunity to get right into a fight, ending in Shinobu mounting her.

Ononoki and I had walked in on them as they tried to shout each other down.

Neither Ononoki nor I would be spying on them so easily without that battle at the start… Whether or not Kanbaru honestly didn't want anyone around, it was very much like her to have failed so spectacularly in the end.

That kind of inattention to detail was in character.

As was the fact that she didn't hesitate to face off against a vampire—if she had something she wanted to say, she said it, whether it was to a cute little girl with blond hair or her esteemed senior.

When she wouldn't compromise on something, she wouldn't compromise on it.

That stubbornness—could she have gotten it from her mother?

I mean, just think about her left hand…

Anyway, a side product of us learning about what led to this situation was the factoid that Kanbaru had moved around as fast and hard as she could while wearing my hoodie directly against her braless skin. This set my heart aflutter to no small degree. Shinobu made it for me, and I rather liked it, but how should I feel wearing it in the future?

Wait, why were they talking about breasts?

"Hold on a moment, why do we speak of breasts?"

"You're the one who brought it up, Shinobu."

"Um…"

Shinobu tried to get started again, her expression still

annoyed—though Kanbaru may have thrown her off beat, that seemed to have calmed her mental state. Of course, just as Kanbaru pointed out, Shinobu called herself a five-hundred-year-old adult (actually five hundred ninety-eight years old) but had no choice but to take the form of a little girl.

In other words, nothing about her seemed mature.

It appeared as though they'd talked each other down, but she'd surely fly into another rage if Kanbaru said something else that bothered her—and in fact, her nails were still placed against Kanbaru's face.

"Fine, I understand what it is ye wish to say—but this is no mere misunderstanding, 'tis meddlesome as well. Just as I said to my master before, thy senior is the only one I could now call my thrall. As I am now—"

"You say you don't understand what I'm saying, but if anything, I don't understand you when you say that—that's exactly what I can't stand you saying."

"Hmm?"

"You're almost making it sound like you should only have one thrall—haven't you ever considered something like you, Araragi-senpai, and this first Aberration Slayer all getting along, the three of you together?"

"The three of us?"

Shinobu seemed confused by Kanbaru's opinion—as was I.

Because she was right.

I'd never considered it.

And—neither had the first Aberration Slayer, most likely.

She said she didn't need two thralls, but when I thought about it, she didn't have a reason for not having two, did she?

So then why had this idea never once come to any of us? That almost made it look like the first Aberration Slayer and I knew we'd face off and fight over Shinobu from the start.

Fight over her?

Like some kind of love triangle?

Yes, almost as if my brain had been rotted by romance.

"That man died out of resentment for me. He showered me in rancorous words and I should forgive that? No thou said I must apologize. Apologize? For making him a vampire out of my own feelings of solitude? And what ye dare say I ought to make up with him?"

"It doesn't matter whether or not you make up with him."

You could hear in Kanbaru's words that she held nothing back. She mercilessly criticized Shinobu, who looked a little weaker after Kanbaru's earlier point and it felt like she also criticized me as I listened.

"You don't have to. That'd involve the both of you, so maybe you can't if you're going to say you want to pick Araragi-senpai over the first Aberration Slayer, that's fine. But you need to be the one to tell him that. You shouldn't leave it up to Miss Izuko or Araragi-senpai."

"And what do ye claim to know?" Shinobu said, disgusted. "This does not involve thee, so thou art able to say anything about it at all thou knowest not. Not a single thing not of my relation with him. Our history. Thou art nothing but a nuisance with thy arbitrary delusions. Nay, not only of what took place four hundred years ago I dare say ye know nothing of even my current relationship with my master, or am I mistaken?"

"It's true, I don't know. But I can tell," Kanbaru insisted without denying Shinobu's words, her valid point.

She was serious and sincere as she spoke.

“About how you feel about your first, and your second.”

“…”

Shinobu gulped—as did I.

Ononoki was just silent—probably because she didn’t understand what Kanbaru truly meant.

But I knew.

Given that the two didn’t have too deep of a relationship, it was a bit strange that Kanbaru would get into it with Shinobu to this degree, her personality aside… But now it made sense.

I’d even thought that she, as my ever-caring junior, was inferring the way I felt and saying these difficult words to Shinobu in my place—but that wasn’t it.

Kanbaru understood better than I did.

And better than Shinobu, of course.

She knew how the first Aberration Slayer felt.

Feelings of obsession—like some kind of true love.

“Enough of thy foolish empathy.”

This seemed to come across even to Shinobu, someone who by no means was perceptive when it came to the subtleties of the human experience. She spoke to Kanbaru with a complicated expression on her face.

“That man, returned from four hundred years ago, may appear pitiful to thee—ye may feel sympathy. However.”

“I’m not sympathizing with him. I don’t feel bad for him, either. I even understand that no one could have stopped this from happening—but it’d just be so hopeless like this. Him coming back to life from four hundred years in the past is like a miracle that no one could have ever predicted, right? Not you, not Araragi-senpai,

not Miss Izuko, probably not even Mister Oshino—and the miracle deserves a fitting reward. If you ignored this miracle, treated it like some sort of statistical phenomenon, pretended it never happened—it would just seem like you're leaving him so empty-handed."

"Which is what ye must find so pity-inducing… But what would satisfy thee? Why must ye raise such a fuss? Have ye not considered that my not meeting him is an act done for his own sake?"

Shinobu's replies grew weaker.

Something about them told me that.

It sounded like she was saying things to try to convince Kanbaru to come around to her side instead of making her own points—was she wavering?

The aberration who had lived for five hundred years?

Was she being defeated in an argument by a seventeen-year-old girl?

"Were I to meet him after all this time, I'd have no words for him—he was never a good thing for me from the start, nor was I for him. Face reality, monkey-girl. There is nothing to do to him now but eliminate him—his existence brings unrest to this town, and he is like the embodiment of those stories of aberrations that now infest this place. His role should be nothing more than that of prey to an expert. He could never be considered harmless the way I or my master have been—ironically, that man who once slew countless aberrations himself will now be defeated by a future colleague—and there is no way to prevent that."

"I know. And that's why."

"That is why? Why is it all the more reason for me to meet him? As I have said again and again, that man resents me—he may kill me if we were to meet. He may kill my master as well. It seems he says I must return his enchanted blade, but I may not be the only one to fall victim to it. So taking all this in consideration—"

“I’ve taken all that into consideration and I’m still saying you should meet him—like I said, forget about logic! Why does everyone refuse to meet people by saying things like that—it’s such a non-starter! If people don’t meet, it’s game over from the start!”

There’d be nothing to tell!

Kanbaru raised her voice—before raising her torso, Shinobu’s hand still around her face. Shinobu began to lose her balance—she couldn’t have expected Kanbaru to get up from being mounted using her abs alone. Shinobu must have felt as though she had her opponent physically dominated, if not mentally—but Kanbaru tried to get up.

Without borrowing the strength of her aberrational left hand, either.

“Just come out and say it,” Kanbaru urged. “You’re scared. Say you’re scared of meeting him.”

“…”

“That you don’t want to meet him and talk to him and get your emotions worked up—king of aberrations? Legendary vampire? Yeah, right. You’re exactly what you look like—a little girl who’s scared of monsters.”

“…”

“You might feel like you’re being faithful, or that you’re showing how virtuous you are by not meeting him because you think you’d be betraying Araragi-senpai if you did—but that’s not true. You’re not betraying him, the only person you’re betraying, the only person you’re lying to, the only person you’re being phony to is yourself. Your weak, phony self.”

“…”

“What’s wrong with saying it. Just say it. Say it. That the kind of love that brought him back over four hundred years is too heavy for you. That honestly, it creeps you out. That it’s a problem if he comes back to life and into yours after all this time, just when

you're getting along with Araragi-senpai. That it's a pain in the ass if he decides to rehash all these things that are just memories for you now. That the way he's being so pushy is gross. That you find his feelings annoying—just say that it would've been better if he stayed dead. If you can't, then don't ever go on about master this, lord that. There's nothing lofty or noble about you."

All you are is shy.

Kanbaru had now gotten all the way up.

"Don't give me that master and servant stuff—you don't deserve to have slaves or masters."

"Ka…"

"You don't deserve to form any relationships at all."

"Kakak!"

Shinobu—laughed.

A gruesome laugh—and I could tell there was strength in her hand now.

This would be my only chance to stop her—yes, there wasn't any logic left at this point, nor was it a discussion.

Right or wrong didn't exist now that it had gone this far.

This was no longer a Shinobu who could stay silent, in the face of that many hostile remarks—Ononoki had started to get up as well. While she probably didn't understand what they were saying, she could sense the disquiet in the air as a warrior.

But.

Just as Ononoki held me back earlier, I stopped her this time. I held her hand and kept her from trying to insert herself between the two.

"Why do you have your fingers wrapped around mine?"

“Oops, my mistake. I confused you with Senjogahara.”

“You’re disgusting.”

I adjusted my grip.

“Wait just a little longer, Ononoki.”

“Why? It’s bad enough already.”

“Even then.”

I understood this could go past the point of no return. Shinobu didn’t discriminate between humans for the most part, and Kanbaru being my junior didn’t mean a thing to her.

She couldn’t suffer that much of an insult.

And not do a thing about it.

Even then…

“Kakak kakak. So are those the dying words ye wish to leave behind? ’Tis I who should be asking thee are ye satisfied after saying all ye wished to say?”

“I’m very dissatisfied. I still have a lot I want to say.”

“I’ve not the space in my heart to hear it. I feel like crushing thy head right here, even if’twould ruin everything.”

“Then go ahead, do it.”

I’m not apologizing, Kanbaru said still glaring at Shinobu from between the fingers clasped across her face.

“Do it, then you can feel awkward around Araragi-senpai next. I bet you’ll start avoiding him, the way you’re avoiding the first Aberration Slayer now. You know the way you’ve been talking about him like he’s something from your past? Well you can make everything about Araragi-senpai a story from your past too.”

“What a fortunate girl so many ways of killing thee have come to

my mind that I hesitated to kill thee out of reflex just now," Shinobu said as she strengthened her grip—then blood.

She was already applying enough strength to Kanbaru's head that her skin tore and her blood ran—but I still didn't move.

I couldn't intervene—it felt wrong to.

If I were to jump in and settle everything down—it'd be such a farcical ending. It'd be wrong for me to end their conversation.

Even if—it went past the point of no return.

Even if it ruined everything.

"So I shall give thee one final chance."

"I don't need it. You're going to throw away your second someday, just like you threw away your first. How could you ever face who your second is when you can't face your first? And your third, and your fourth, and your fifth—just keep on splitting up with people forever."

"Forever?"

"You're immortal, aren't you? You know what Araragi-senpai said once? He said—that if you wanted to die tomorrow, he was ready for his own life to end tomorrow, too. But I bet you'd never say anything like that. Even if you did—you'd say it to your third, too. And to your fourth. And to your fifth—you'd keep on living, and you'd keep on saying it."

"…"

That…

The words were overpowering to Shinobu, someone who'd even tried to end her own life after she grew bored of immortality.

"Do not assume all are as social as thee. Ye summed me up as shy earlier—but 'tis natural to feel disinclined to meet someone, is it not?"

“No, it’s unnatural. Even if you don’t meet eye-to-eye with everyone, you still meet them.”

“I am not a person.”

“Maybe not, by the looks of you.”

They were diametrically opposed.

My conversation with the boy Aberration Slayer had been pretty damn fruitless—but Shinobu and Kanbaru’s was quite barren as well.

No, it even felt like the more they talked, the wider the disconnect—but.

It meant their roots were entwined.

Their roots were the same.

“’Tis not as if I could say something to him if we were to meet, thou must realize. Ours was a relationship defined by hate. We were brought together by mutual hate before we first separated, then hate brought us together once more before we were separated again, by death—I have no intention of reconciling with him, nor do I intend on the three of us all getting along. I do not intend on speaking of the first alongside the second. I consider the simple comparison between the two to be an affront to my master.”

Something she said here surprised me.

No, not that Shinobu could consider anything to be an affront to me—it was what she said about mutual hate.

I’d heard that the first Aberration Slayer killed himself out of hatred—but this was my first time hearing that Shinobu hated him.

Of course it was.

It wasn’t as if she’d told me everything, and there was the whole matter of her level of excitement when she spoke—but.

One thing was certain.

Suruga Kanbaru had managed to pull out emotions from Shinobu that I never could.

Was this it?

Was this the real reason Miss Gaen gave this job to Kanbaru? She'd said she needed Kanbaru's left hand, and I'd assumed that Kanbaru's ties to the Gaen family was key. That's what I'd been telling myself, but here Kanbaru was an outsider, someone who stood distant from the situation I'd seen her as nothing more than a bystander who'd been dragged in, but could Miss Gaen have actually "dragged her in" to put her up against Shinobu like this?

Whether Kanbaru had added an extra item to my shopping list on purpose, or if it was just another one of those miracles that happened around her… When I went back and thought about it, I went to go buy breakfast I was encouraged to leave the scene by Miss Gaen.

She could tell that I'd go shopping if she handed me a five-thousand-yen bill and given that this was Miss Gaen, she could have known there'd be a chance, or was even sure that I'd encounter the first Aberration Slayer, were I to climb down the mountain.

Was I reading too much into this?

How could she predict something like the first Aberration Slayer returning with a will of his own when she first tried to drag Kanbaru into this job?

"…"

No, maybe she could.

I know everything.

The lady who knows everything.

Who knew, maybe she'd even predicted that I'd buy some cougar photo books…

“That’s going a little too far,” Ononoki jumped in, despite not knowing anything about that situation.

Really? She was going to zing me over a situation she didn’t even know about?

“Please don’t try to play stupid to provide comic relief here, monstieur. I think we’re nearing the emotional climax.”

“Emotional climax… This really is just a show to you, isn’t it?”

“That’s not true. You’re about to see the tears start to really flow. From me.”

“Yeah right. And that’d just be a cry-max, not a climax, anyway.”

Whatever the case, Miss Gaen certainly had no desire to meet her long-lost niece—her older sister’s daughter.

So—even if Miss Gaen knew everything, there were some things she didn’t understand.

Wanting to meet someone.

The desire to meet someone—she didn’t understand that.

Ah.

At that moment—after my eighteen years alive and many experiences, I understood for the first time.

Loving someone and wanting to meet them—are two different emotions.

“Nor is there anything I could do for the first, were I to meet him—I could not so much as give back the enchanted blade Kokorowatari, not now. It has integrated itself into my body,” Shinobu said. In a subdued voice. “Listen close, for this is what I wish to say. It is not that I refuse to meet him because I derive no benefit from doing so—meeting would not be good for him, either. What meaning would there be in having him see me getting along well with my master? Having him see that I no longer have any feelings at all for

him—what meaning is there in that? Ye would have me do something as cruel as that?"

"That's right. I'm telling you to do the cruel thing. It's your job to wound that man in your past," Kanbaru said. In a fierce voice. "Do you just want to be someone good and loved by all? Do you want to be loved and nothing else?"

"Thy words…are no different from saying that 'tis better to destroy what would otherwise grow weathered and faded—"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"And if he now wishes to kill me out of hatred, I have no choice but to kill him in turn—I would not allow myself to be killed for his sake. While I admit that I may owe him apologies, I do not expect him to forgive me. And still ye say I should?"

"You should. If that happens, just respond to those feelings of hate—just cut those feelings off. But if you apologize and he does forgive you—"

"The outcome would be no different. He would be eliminated by those experts the moment after he forgives me—still I should?"

"You still should."

You still should, Kanbaru repeated.

Shinobu seemed irritated—maybe she saw it as Kanbaru making fun of her, because her grip grew even tighter… It could barely be any stronger.

I thought I even heard the sound of Kanbaru's skull creaking.

"Even if thy foolish prediction is correct and that man did return out of his feelings for me—I would never respond to such feelings. Were I to meet him, the most I could ever do would be to mercilessly and unsparingly reject him. And still I should?"

"You still should."

“Say I met him□”

A gruesome smile reappeared on Shinobu’s face.

More gruesome than I’d ever seen.

It was as grotesque as a smile could be.

“What would ye do if I wanted to respond to those feelings? If instead of thy senior□I chose the first Aberration Slayer, then what? Still I should?”

“You still should.”

And if that happens, Suruga Kanbaru declared□as her blood spilled.

“Make a clean break from Araragi-senpai□and live by his side forever.”

Dangle.

Shinobu’s hand, the one wrapped tight around Kanbaru’s head, dangled and fell□swinging back and forth, strengthless. Not just her hand. Shinobu’s face and shoulders both slumped and drooped.

She didn’t say it out loud.

Shinobu still had the far more dominant position. Though now off balance, she straddled Kanbaru□and Kanbaru was the one bleeding.

But it was so clear.

Yes.

Shinobu Oshino had admitted defeat.

The legendary vampire who had lived for over half a millennium, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, had just admitted that she lost□to a seventeen-year-old high school girl, at that.

It was my first time.

I’d never seen Shinobu Oshino lose one-on-one before.

“Ononoki,” I said□at some point, I’d let go of her hand. “I have a request.”

“Another one? Stop using me like some kind of convenient tool. Know your place, punk.”

“Punk? Don’t worry, this is my last request,” I said, pointing at my face.

“Could you take this stamp off of me?”

“…?” Ononoki tilted her head like she didn’t understand. “I can’t guarantee your safety if I did that. I understand that my footprint is embarrassing, but you just have to put up for it this one night and everything will be okay.”

She’d put her footprint on my face knowing that it’d be embarrassing? And you know, given the role it played, there didn’t seem to be any particular need for it to be on my face, or even for it to be a footprint, so long as others could see it…

I spoke once more.

I spoke, looking straight forward□my eyes fixed on a bleeding Suruga Kanbaru and a defeated Shinobu Oshino.

“I feel like dueling someone.”

027

Anyone looking back from the future and passing judgment on the situation would probably think that Kanbaru was right—but as someone living in the same time and the same place as her, Kanbaru's opinions were just too severe.

She'd been excessive, no matter how you look at it.

From the perspective of someone with a personality that's not particularly extroverted like myself, she, with her master's degree in sociability, acted in an utterly incomprehensible way.

It was as if she'd gone into a fairly settled situation and not just rocked the boat, she'd capsized it—I almost got a headache when I wondered why she would knowingly refuse to work everything out in a peaceful manner.

It made me want to throw everything I had at each of her sound arguments.

This was Suruga Kanbaru, after all. Someone with the distinguished record of having gone over to play at the homes of every girl in her class during her first month of school when she first entered Naoetsu High.

She approached her relationships with other people in a fundamentally different way from me, someone who couldn't even manage to join an extracurricular club or sports team—and when I thought about it, Shinobu hadn't made a single thrall until four hundred years ago, living all on her own, and she'd only had a total of two thralls in her five hundred years alive (six hundred, really). That didn't mean she was chaste and well-behaved so much as it meant she showed a striking lack of communication abilities.

It wouldn't be right to speak of my solitude as being on the same

level as Shinobu's, of course—but if you were to keep this in mind, both she and I would have a hard time understanding what Kanbaru was saying, nor would Kanbaru be able to understand how we felt.

We couldn't understand one another.

On a fundamental level.

But if I was going to say that—then maybe Kanbaru best understood how the first Aberration Slayer felt out of us all, or perhaps she was the only one who understood.

Middle school.

When Suruga Kanbaru had a pseudo-sisterly relationship with Hitagi Senjogahara—known then as the Valhalla Duo, she was one half of the best-known relationship in school, according to Hanekawa.

Kanbaru must have assumed that it'd last forever—but Senjogahara, one year older than her, proceeded to high school one step ahead of her.

And then she changed in high school.

Though Kanbaru had drawn on her inherent diligence to work hard and enter Naoetsu High despite her somewhat lacking academics, she found herself flatly rejected by a changed Senjogahara.

From what I hear, she said some awful things.

"I don't think of you as a friend or even as my junior—not now, nor did I ever." — "Being friends with a talented junior like you would boost my own reputation, and that was the only reason I was nice to you." — "I only acted like a caring senior."

And after that, the two didn't interact for over a year.

It wasn't all positive for Kanbaru when they started interacting again—because a hard-to-understand, thoughtless, stupid boy who lived a frivolous life appeared as well.

Me.

Koyomi Araragi.

I, this vague, nonsensical guy who could just as easily be replaced by anyone appeared as a partner of this changed Hitagi Senjogahara.

I can't imagine how Kanbaru must have felt then.

An average high schooler with no redeeming qualities actually stands out as its own strong personality, but I wasn't even that.

It was this person who seemed to have swept in and snatched away Senjogahara, her adored senior—and Suruga Kanbaru couldn't stand it.

She couldn't stand it, and so.

She made a wish to a monkey.

It was unlike a girl as honest and straightforward as her—but perhaps it was very much in character, since it was the only way she could keep herself from running away from how she lived her life.

That's the kind of girl she is.

Which is why she understood how the first Aberration Slayer felt.

How it felt to be someone's first—and how it felt to be the runner-up.

The scale was different, of course—equating the two situations might actually bother the first Aberration Slayer. It'd be like calling Shinobu's solitude and mine the same thing. Kanbaru's relationship with Senjogahara had been cut off for about the year it took for Kanbaru to finish middle school, two at most if you included the time after that—compared to that, what scale could there be for four hundred years?

Shinobu's relationship with the first Aberration Slayer couldn't have

been anything like Senjogahara's relationship with Kanbaru—and if you were to say this, no one could understand the true relationship between the first Aberration Slayer and the second.

Not a single person existed who knew of that time.

Every one of them had been swallowed by the Darkness.

Still, Suruga Kanbaru sympathized.

She sympathized, but she didn't commiserate.

She empathized—and aligned with him.

That's why she hounded Shinobu—she couldn't stand there not saying a single word as Shinobu tried to avoid meeting him, to avoid facing him, and she couldn't keep herself to only a single word, either.

It wasn't something I could do.

I'd grown too close to Shinobu. I couldn't reject her way of thinking or way of life. I couldn't fight with her the way Kanbaru did, either—nor could I argue with her.

I couldn't confront her opinions with my own, nor could we engage in heated debate—that's just what it means to be soulmates, but maybe I should have been the one to say the kinds of things that Kanbaru said to Shinobu.

Not that I'd ever think about it, being so unsocial—honestly, just how much work was I going to pass off onto my junior?

Even here at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, during Nadeko Sengoku's case, I had Kanbaru dirty her hands in facing the Jagirinawa.

To make matters worse, I'd handed most of the comic-relief duties off to her this time around, which is why I needed to face the first Aberration Slayer—at the very least to repay this girl who'd faced off against Shinobu alone.

That's what I thought.

That was my decision.

“It’s not like you have to fight, you know.”

Gotta love it, he added.

Episode, the half-vampire expert who had appeared at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine in the evening, smiled as he rested against the massive cross sticking out from the shrine grounds.

Apparently he wasn’t able to keep this cross of his in some other dimension the way enchanted blades and the like were kept. It was a cross, after all, so maybe he couldn’t use any vampiric abilities on it.

“All you had to do was get him to agree to a duel, and now Miss Gaen’s plans have all fallen into place—now that we’re able to summon the first Aberration Slayer to an established location, your role is basically done, thrall of Heartunderblade. Pretty sure Miss Gaen planned on me fighting him. Pretty sure that’s why she wanted me.”

“Maybe. But still.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine—I’m not gonna argue with you on that one. I’m a mercenary. I care less than anyone when it comes to who fights—I’ll gladly let you handle it, so long as it means one less vampire in this world. In fact, I’d even be happy if you, Heartunderblade, and the first Aberration Slayer all died.”

I doubted this was a simple quip.

I was generally considered harmless—plus, he’d lost to me in the game set out by Oshino over spring break. He said he couldn’t lay a hand on me and Shinobu, but inside, he saw all vampires as his enemies.

A half-vampire.

He hated humans and vampires alike.

“Are you done with whatever ‘formalities’ you had?” I asked,

hesitantly.

He nodded. “Yes—of course. She’s meticulous when it comes to that stuff. We tracked down the first Aberration Slayer and properly negotiated with him—just as Mèmè Oshino negotiated with me. Though I doubt Miss Gaen is as sincere as Mèmè Oshino.”

“…”

I never imagined Oshino would ever be described as sincere, but to be fair, maybe he was in comparison to Miss Gaen—everything’s relative, huh?

Should we be comparing everything, even the incomparable?

“Oh—Episode, I have to admit, I wondered what was going to happen after we let the first Aberration Slayer get away in that empty plot, but you tracked him down? You really are professionals.”

“We really are professionals? That miracle you pulled off was no amateur feat.”

At least, that was the first time I’d ever seen Miss Gaen let an opponent get away, Episode said—it didn’t feel bad to hear that, though I felt sure it wasn’t meant as a compliment.

“All that’s left for us to do now is to wait for night, then you and the first Aberration Slayer can face off in a one-on-one duel—but just to help you relax a little, I’ll tell you now. You can lose.”

“…?”

“You losing would just mean me stepping in—and in the worst case, Miss Gaen will make a move. That’s all. Sure, we’re calling this a stage for a duel, but really, it’s like the site of an exorcism. A real dead end this time, one he can’t get away from. Do you see that as cowardly?” Episode asked as if to preempt me. “Didn’t I tell you before? There’s no such thing as cowardice when it comes to expelling aberrations—not to mention that we’re up against another expert this time around. He knew that when he accepted this, and I’m sure he’s doing everything he can to escape from the boundaries

of our stage. Call it a battle of wits, if you want—it's not as much about strength as duel might make you think. So you don't have to win—all you have to do is not die."

"Not die?"

"Duh, because Heartunderblade will be completely freed if you did. Don't tell me you forgot."

"…"

It's not as if I'd forgotten.

But at the same time, I wouldn't have to worry even if something happened to me in the duel—as long as the first Aberration Slayer took on the role I now played.

"No, because I bet that's the one scenario Miss Gaen fears—Heartunderblade linking back up with her original thrall is the most worrying outcome of all. How could it not be bad? Two vampires out there like Heartunderblade? You need to be more conscious of the fact that you're holding back a monster that could destroy the world ten times over."

Being told that I'm Shinobu's safety valve didn't feel quite as good as what he said before, given how powerless and useless I was.

It almost made me feel like some guy whose special ability was to scatter adult magazines everywhere.

What kind of exorcist was I?

"There might not be any point in asking, since you don't seem to expect that much of me, but what happens to him if I do win this duel?"

"He'll be wiped out. He'll be so killed by either me or Miss Gaen that he'll leave no residual effects behind. It's too bad there's no bounty on his head, seeing that his existence as an aberration isn't recognized, but Miss Gaen will pay me a bonus. So don't worry about it—the result's gonna be the same whether you win or lose. Your duel with the first Aberration Slayer is, you know, like an

opening act, a performance… Like throwing out the first pitch."

Throwing out the first pitch.

I understood this was him trying in his own way to get me to relax, but it was deflating□well.

Even if it was the first pitch, I didn't know who was the pitcher, and who was the batter, not to mention that it'd be a weird opening ceremony if the batter was allowed to swing. Maybe you could call it a chance for me and the Aberration Slayer to show off.

"So, well…"

Finished with his explanation, Episode pulled up the cross he rested against and plopped it on his shoulder□he handled the silver cross, which could have weighed as much as a ton or so, with ease.

A half-vampire.

His powers as a vampire were halved, but so were his weaknesses□which meant this expert in a white traditional school uniform could use his powers even during the day.

"So, well, as you know, my mom and my dad were a vampire and a human, respectively."

"…?"

"But I don't want that example to lead the likes of you to think that humans can form bonds with aberrations, or get along with them, okay? If anything, I want you to think of my existence as a sad sort of failure."

Failure? It was unlike Episode to use such a word about himself. It couldn't have been modesty.

"I mean, my mom and my dad were killed afterwards□wiped out by humans and eaten by vampires not long at all after they got together."

Even I'd have been in trouble if I hadn't been taken in, he said, his

tone unchanged. He spoke a truth so shocking that for a brief, fleeting moment, I forgot that I'd once been in a battle to the death with the guy.

"Gotta love it, right? But that's how it is—so don't get any weird hopes. Not about your relationship with Heartunderblade."

"But, that—"

Flustered, I turned to him.

I couldn't swallow that as the truth—wasn't his case a special exception? Though I saw why he'd become an expert with his private reasons.

If his father was sucked dry by vampires, and his mother was killed by humans, then of course—

"Hm? Oh, no, you've got it all mixed up. My human dad was exorcised by humans, and my vampire mom was eaten by vampires. Both of 'em were treated like traitors by their own kind. But I can't say I blame them. I'd think the same about a traitor."

"…"

His shocking truth…had only become more shocking.

How could I, with my peaceful upbringing, say anything to that? This youth in a white traditional school uniform who I once saw as nothing more than a hated enemy suddenly felt so familiar and distant at the same time.

"Who took you in? Who protected you when both humans and vampires were against you?"

"I dunno if I'd say protected—they probably had all kinds of plans for me…" Episode hesitated for a brief moment. "It was Guillotine Cutter's church."

Guillotine Cutter…

One of the three experts who'd visited this town over spring break

to eliminate Shinobu…

“So…that makes you□”

“Oh, no way. That god freak wasn’t some kind of parent to me. All I’m saying is that as someone with my own private reasons, I just can’t take Heartunderblade’s side here. I think she’s getting what she deserves, stuck in the middle like this riding a fence. Gotta love it!”

Episode began to leave Kita-Shirahebi Shrine□to make his own preparations, no doubt. I nearly watched him walk off, but spoke out to his cross-bearing back at the last second.

“Hold on, I never heard the most important part.”

Episode didn’t care one way or another about whether I took part in this duel, so it must have slipped his mind… But I needed him to tell me.

“Where are these dueling grounds you set up? Where should I go tonight?”

“Oh, about that,” he turned and said. He’d cheerfully told me about the way his parents were killed, but now he looked gloomy, as if he’d recalled something unpleasant. “We’re following precedent here. A spot you’re pretty familiar with□I’d call it fated.”

“Fated?”

“Naoetsu Private High School’s athletic field.”

028

This is out of chronological order, but□

The fight between Suruga Kanbaru and Shinobu Oshino ended at around noon, so if you wanted to know what happened after that, it went in a direction that diverged a little from the “emotional climax” Ononoki expected.

First off, once Shinobu finished receiving all of Kanbaru’s dressing-down and urging-on, her next act was to sulk and go to sleep□she stood up to get off of Kanbaru’s body, then trudged to the rear of the shrine. Kanbaru didn’t continue to follow her at that point. The nocturnal Shinobu was in part too sleepy to continue, but I’m sure being defeated in an argument by a high school girl hit her unexpectedly hard.

When I thought about it, going to sleep whenever anything annoying happens is a coping mechanism she’s used for four hundred years now□in response, Ononoki, who’d seen their exchange from nearly the beginning, said by my side:

“Hah. Lame.” (Again, what kind of character was she supposed to be?) The shikigami shrugged her shoulders, stood, and continued, “What a boring fight that was. I’m leaving, monstieur. I need to report to Miss Gaen about this. Once I’m done reporting to her, I think I’ll delete my boring memories of this boring fight.”

“What did you experience over the last twelve hours to make you like this? Also, were you listening to me? This sign and seal on me…”

“Sign and seal? Could you not use such old-fashioned terms? Please, call it where others fear to tread.”

“I’m not humoring your joke. What kind of bootlicker do you take

me for? And you stepped on me with your bare feet, anyway, not your shoes."

"Okay, fine. I'll take it off tonight. I'll add that to my report, too."

"I'd appreciate it. Oh, and if you're going to meet Miss Gaen□"

"Your link, right? I guess you do have to restore it if you want a fighting chance," Ononoki said as she walked off and left Kita-Shirahebi Shrine□walking straight down the mountain instead of using the stairs.

To be honest, I was at a loss as to what to do now that I was alone. I had so little idea about how I should face Kanbaru or Shinobu after seeing that exchange up close. I felt like climbing right back down the mountain, but it wasn't as if I could.

I did also want to take a look at Kanbaru's head. She was bleeding, though not severely□I may not have been able to treat her wounds now, but still.

I went back the way I came, passed through the torii gate once more, and with my best unconcerned look, tried to walk naturally (in truth probably a little faster than usual) before arriving at Kanbaru. I'd made a rather long detour.

"Hm? What's the matter, Kanbaru? What're you doing on the ground there? You're bleeding from your head, are you okay?"

"Huh? You know, don't you? You were watching from right over there until a second ago."

"You knew?!"

So she'd been having that conversation with Shinobu knowing I was close by?! Her heart was so tough that she actually needed to see a cardiologist!

Ononoki could hide her presence perfectly (or rather, she didn't have any presence to begin with), so it seemed as though Kanbaru hadn't noticed her, but she must have sensed me in the bushes, even if she couldn't see me.

You really shouldn't underestimate an athlete's sixth sense…

"Don't worry, Shinobu didn't notice you. So, did you buy me that book?"

"Hold on a second, you can't just brush that topic aside! You've gotta let us discuss what just happened a little more!"

"? But you already heard everything. More importantly, the book…"

"You're way too fixated on it. Just how important is it to you? At least let me look at your head wound."

Of course, what went on inside it worried me way more than any external injury…

"Mmf," Kanbaru thrust her head out toward me.

I didn't expect to find the gesture so adorable… Well, as long as I ignored the fact that it was a result of holding her novel's two volumes tightly in either hand.

I parted Kanbaru's hair, grown long ever since she quit the team, and took a look at the lacerations on her skin created by Shinobu's Iron Claw.

Hmm… Well, it seemed fine…

It looked bad, given how easy it is to bleed from your head, but when I wiped up the blood, I found the wounds minor enough. I could leave them be and not use any kind of vampiric ability…

"It'd be neat if you could play with my hair while I read this novel…"

"Could you please not amuse yourself with a novel while I'm concerned about you?"

"You don't need to worry, injuries like this come with the territory if you play sports. Anyway, could you keep touching my hair like that for a little longer?"

“What would be the point? Um…”

What was it again? I needed to talk to her about something…

“Eh, I guess it’s fine.”

“Hm? What is?”

“Nothing.”

It’d be strange to thank her here, and things were fine for the time being now that I knew she wasn’t seriously injured… That’s all there was to say. I mussed Kanbaru’s hair.

“Yup, nothing. C’mon, Kanbaru. Let’s have lunch.”

“Yeah, I’m starved. I’ll just keep reading this book, so you feed me, okay? Aahh.”

“Don’t aahh me. No senior would ever spoil his junior that much.”

“Hm? There doesn’t seem to be much here.”

“I ran into budget problems… I did buy some donuts, too, but Shinobu…” I looked over at the shrine, wondering what to do. It almost felt like I was going to have to wake a sleeping god. “What’s next for her?”

“If she’s sleeping, I say let her sleep. She’s nocturnal, after all. Shouldn’t she wake up once it’s night?”

“Yeah, but… Um, are you not interested, Kanbaru? You laid it on that thick to her and yet you don’t care about what she does next?”

“Whether I’m interested or not, it’s up to her. I already said what I wanted to say, so I’m satisfied.”

What I’m interested about right now is how the savage garçon is going to huff and puff and blow this half-boy down, Kanbaru said, engrossed in her book.

I wanted to let her know just how much trouble this savage garçon

of hers had gotten me into, but this too was a part of who Kanbaru was—social people like her also have a solid line that divides them from others.

Meanwhile, people with as few friends as me have a tendency not to differentiate their own business with the business of others nearly as much as they should, which leads to trouble.

Something Shinobu and I may have in common.

“So, my senior? My bra?”

“Like that’s what you really wanted me to buy. Yeah, I bought you one. Here.”

“My bra?”

“Here!”

It was a cheap one from a discount store and not a lingerie shop due to my budget…but it’s what’s on the inside that counts.

Whether it comes to heads or chests.

“Okay, I’m going to keep on reading, so you put it on for me. Aahh.”

“Stop trying to ‘aahh’ like it’s some kind of double entendre. Anyway, Kanbaru. Don’t you have anything for me?”

“Hm?”

“Some kind of advice you’re willing to put your body on the line for?”

“What’s that? You want me to put my body where?”

“Sorry, no. You can keep it right there. Just give it to me orally.”

“I don’t know about that one, either… But no, nothing really.”

“Really? Nothing?”

“Oh, I could never be so forward as to dare give advice to my esteemed senior. I’m just a little girl,” the little girl who’d unflinchingly argued with a five-hundred-plus-year-old vampire said as she kept her eyes laser-focused on her novel.

Readers like her were an author’s blessing… I did wish she’d spare a little bit of her blessings for her senior, though.

“You just have to be the same senpai you always are. Don’t try extra hard or anything, just be yourself. Treat practice like the real thing, and treat the real thing like practice. That’s what athletes live by,” Kanbaru said, almost like a captain speaking to a teammate the day before a big tournament. “If I gotta keep going, it’s all about DIY.”

“DIY?”

“Do your best.”

“…”

That would be DYB, and not the term she’d used for amateur artisanship, but I decided not to make any quip.

Because “do it yourself” was actually the exact advice I needed to hear.

After this, I took a nap in preparation for that night Shinobu had monopolized the space inside the shrine proper, so I was basically sleeping rough. Lacking my physical enhancement, I needed to sleep, but had trouble getting any. Not just because I was outdoors though, I’m sure. Kanbaru kept reading her novel the entire time did athletes never run out of stamina?

Episode visited the shrine in the evening and gave me the details about the duel Miss Gaen had set up.

Naoetsu Private High School’s athletic field.

The school where both Kanbaru and I were enrolled.

Sure, Episode would see it as fate it was where he fought a legendary vampire he’d chased after, as well as her thrall.

At the same time.

It was also where Shinobu and I, where Koyomi Araragi and Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, fought to the death.

He was right. It did follow precedent, and it was a suitable location.

For a duel between the First and the Second.

For a schism between slaves.

For a conclusion□so suitable I could barely stomach it.

029

“Hi, Senjogahara?”

“Oh, Koyo.”

“You’ve never once called me by that nickname before.”

“What’s the matter? If you’re calling me like this, does that mean you’ve settled whatever problem you ran into this time around?”

“No…”

“Does it mean you’ve prepared yourself emotionally for the way Miss Hanekawa and I are going to rake you over the coals?”

“You’re scaring me.”

“You only have yourself to blame. You can’t just skip school whenever the fancy strikes, you know… Not that I have any right to be saying that.”

“Hm? Well…I’m not finished, anyway. My plan was to wait until this was over before contacting you, but I couldn’t take it any longer. Sorry, I just got anxious.”

“I see… Well, I’m happy to hear that. I’d thought you were off flirting with Kanbaru and had forgotten all about the likes of little old me.”

“Of course not. Don’t say that, you’re going to make me mad. But, well□it’ll all be settled tonight. Yeah, I can give you a proper explanation once I’m back.”

“Is that so. Well, you can leave Miss Hanekawa to me.”

“Hm? Did something happen with her?”

“…Kanbaru never told you?”

“? About what?”

“Oh, nothing… It seems we share a terrifying junior in common. If you haven’t heard, though□just hear it straight from her once you’re back. That should also motivate you to return safely, right? I know you must be acting as reckless as ever, Koyo.”

“Could you please stop calling me Koyo?”

“Should I call you Koyote?”

“Oh, so I’m like your dog now?”

“If I’m being honest, I do wish you’d drop what you’re doing and make your way back home like a faithful little boy… But I take it that’s not something you can do.”

“That’s right. It’s not… There’s a lot I need to tell you once I’m back. A lot I want to apologize about, and a lot I want to say. We should talk about this face-to-face, though.”

“Don’t phrase things in a way that makes it sound like we’re breaking up, please. You’re scaring me.”

“Oh, sorry. That came out wrong. Hey, Senjogahara?”

“What is it, Koyote?”

“I really hope you haven’t decided on calling me that… Hey, there’s something I wanted you to tell me.”

“Chanel No. 5.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask, and that’s a lie, anyway. When Kanbaru entered Naoetsu High a year ago and met you□how did you feel? I want you to be honest. When your junior whom you’d had no contact with for a full year, someone you saw as a friend from the past whom you’d left behind, came all the way into your today□how did you feel?”

“…”

“Oh, sorry. That was a weird question. My bad, just forget about it.”

“No. Hearing that question, I see the problem you’re in, Koncourse.”

“Wow! Is that supposed to be a nickname for me?”

“Konsole works too.”

“How do you even get to either of those from Koyomi?”

“To be honest, it felt like a lot—you know, the weight of her emotions.”

“…”

“She’d always carried around too many fantasies about me—but if you’ll allow me to correct you on just one point, I wouldn’t say that I rejected Kanbaru unilaterally back then as she tried to cling onto me. She said some pretty rough things to me about the way I was going about my life.”

“Yeah. I was starting to get that feeling.”

“Of course, it didn’t really resonate back then. She’s special, someone chosen—which is why she could say those kinds of things, I thought. That she was a genius on another level compared to a phony like me.”

“…”

“‘Hard work doesn’t always lead to success, but everyone successful has worked hard’—people who are successful always say that kind of thing, right? They try to convince you it wasn’t luck that caused them to succeed, it was their own hard work. Well, I was at an age where I hated hearing that kind of thing.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not something you age out of… In fact, I imagine you still hate it now.”

“Well, I had another thought when you helped me reconcile with

her. That's not how it is. Even geniuses struggle."

"…"

"Everyone struggles□I guess that's obvious. For so long, I wanted that feeling of 'I'm special' that special people have□but that's when I realized it doesn't mean anything."

"…"

"Did we get a little off track? I said the weight of her emotions was a lot□but I think part of that was me. I was too light then to endure all that weight. If I wanted to be with Kanbaru, though, I'd have to become someone capable of enduring it□which is something I'm still pursuing. Of course, I'm also doing it for you. I'm working at it, believe it or not. So that I can become your bride one day, Araragi."

"…"

"Was that too much?"

"No, not at all."

"Really, there's no such thing as special or normal. Those are just comparisons□right? Sure, people will think of you as special if you're born into a fabulously wealthy family, but if you're going to say that, everyone I know is special for being born during this age in such a peaceful country."

"This might be my last chance, so could I ask you something that might upset you?"

"I wouldn't mind answering as long as you redact that worrying lead-in."

"If someone who outclassed me in every way told you they loved you, what would you do?"

"Ugh, you're such a sissy! Oh my god, are you really asking that?"

"Er, um, yeah, I know, but."

“You’re trying to get me to say something awful to you, aren’t you? You’re seeing how far you can push me before I get mad! Gross! That does it, we’re breaking up tomorrow!”

“Um, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to…and I think that reaction is enough of one on its own, but…please, could you not talk about breaking up tomorrow?”

“I get the feeling you’re having to swallow your pride to ask me this, so I’ll give you an honest answer. I’m a hundred percent certain I’d get over it.”

“Wow, you’re…amazing for being able to say that.”

“I know that no bond between two people is absolute. Watching my parents taught me that.”

“Senjogahara□no, that’s□”

“And if you think about it, the idea of an unbreakable bond is pretty scary□which just means you need to hustle instead, so someone can’t get over you. Even if you can’t become a special person, you can still be special to someone, right?”

“Special to□someone.”

“I’m working every day to be someone special to you and Kanbaru□so don’t worry, Araragi. You’re plenty special. To me, to Kanbaru□and to Shinobu. We’ve chosen you.”

“So you really did understand… Wow.”

“I’m your girlfriend. I’m very happy you called me. I love you.”

“I love you too. Once I get back, why don’t we…talk more about this kind of thing?”

“Let’s. I’ll be waiting for you in the nude.”

“…You have a lot to do with why Kanbaru is such a pervert, don’t you?”

030

From there, all the actors assembled at Naoetsu Private High School's athletic field on the night of August twenty-fourth□or so I wish I could say, but a number of them were still missing.

We can touch on this later, but it also marked my first time going to my high school in the four days since summer break ended. Now that I thought about it, my school didn't make us show up at any point during summer break like some others do (or maybe it does, but not to my knowledge), making this my first attendance in the thirty-seven or so days since first term ended. The fact that I'd come in the dead of night, when every student, teacher, administrator, and more had already left, was very much in character for me.

I still hadn't done my summer vacation homework, I realized only now. That had been the start of this whole string of incidents continuing on from the last day of summer break, but that homework would be so far in the past by the time I got back to school that I might dodge the bullet.

You know, I had some pretty serious guts on me too.

Anyway, now that a barrier had been constructed around the field, just like during spring break, intruders and third-party interventions were no longer a worry.

"All right, then. Let's get this started nice and quick, then ended nice and quick," Miss Gaen said.

It did feel like she was acting a little distant from me, but that had to be my imagination. Miss Gaen was an understanding adult.

Episode stood by her side.

His massive cross didn't stick out from the ground the way it did in Kita-Shirahebi Shrine (it'd have left an awful mark if it did), but

rested instead on his shoulder—probably a sign that he was ready to fight at any moment.

It must have been because they were both that type of person at their core, but the two maintained a relaxed attitude—that, or they weren't too interested. Still, you could tell they took their job seriously.

I doubted either of them ever showed the kind of frivolity that Kaiki or Miss Kagenui wouldn't think twice about flaunting as they worked—perhaps it was understandable coming from Kaiki, a con artist, but Miss Kagenui being that way showed just how unusual she was.

Could that have been why Miss Gaen didn't get Miss Kagenui involved, even though this case involved immortal vampires? That was as much speculation as I could engage in as someone who'd fought and been spared by her.

In fact, the duel that would soon take place might not be that big of a deal, compared to how recklessly I'd gone to face off against Miss Kagenui—of course, one very big condition differed between that time and this one.

On that note, the tween doll girl and tsukumogami who acted as Miss Kagenui's shikigami, Yotsugi Ononoki—wasn't present.

Unbelievable! Ononoki, not here?!

No tween girls around?!

What did I bother coming here for, then?!

The fact made me want to scream all this and more (I'm joking here), but it seemed she'd been asked to handle another task after reporting to Miss Gaen about our interaction and was now off on a trip elsewhere.

Yet another task…

I'm not going to continue talking about the degree to which Ononoki is overworked, but where could she be going at this point

and what would she be doing there? They said this job would come to a conclusion here no matter what. Curious, I asked Miss Gaen for details.

“She’s tying up the loose ends now that we’ve set things straight with this job—a job’s not over just because you set things straight, you know. Especially the way I do things. I make sure that things can never happen again by eliminating any potential reproducibility—I’m thorough about prevention. If an incident happens, I take it into account for the future. That’s what she’s doing.”

Apparently, that’s what Ononoki was doing.

I didn’t quite understand, but in any case, Miss Gaen already had her eye on what would take place after tonight. Maybe that was natural from her perspective, but I did wish she’d stop pretending to act tough by folding her arms in front of her as she spoke when she really just wanted to block my view of her chest.

I did also wish she’d stop treating what I was about to attempt as garbage time—or wait, was it the first pitch?

“You’re right. Don’t worry, I’ll undo Yotsugi’s stamp—though it might not be possible to restore your link without the other party in question around,” Miss Gaen said a bit cynically.

Yes.

That was right.

When I said there were missing actors, I meant Shinobu as much as Ononoki—Shinobu Oshino ended up not leaving the shrine.

I called out to her and knocked on the entrance once it was time to go, but she still didn’t come out—this time it really was like me needing to wake a sleeping god, but no ritual I attempted had any effect.

She’d decided not to see the first Aberration Slayer, after all—in that case, I just had to respect her decision. Right. My determination didn’t have to line up with Shinobu’s resolution.

In that case, I just had to win the duel at any cost, so that Shinobu wouldn't have to see the first Aberration Slayer—not that any bald attempt to redouble my convictions mattered. Even if what seemed to be the predetermined outcome played out and I lost, Miss Gaen and Episode weren't going to let him see Shinobu anyway.

Even so, there was meaning in me doing this.

Just as she'd declared, Kanbaru hadn't tried to pull Shinobu out from the shrine proper where she'd confined herself—but as my junior, she did take part in some of my slapdash rituals, possibly because she just found it amusing.

"Why don't we get going already?" she urged nonchalantly—even adding, "Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll protect you."

What a reliable junior I had.

Not that I could stand to give her any more work after all she'd done—another reason I needed to give this my all.

I couldn't look lame in front of a junior like her.

And so, with the four of us, myself included, gathered—the last to appear was the man at the center of this series of affairs.

The first Aberration Slayer.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's first thrall—a vampire who'd returned over the course of four hundred years.

An expert from olden times.

Out of nowhere—he appeared clad in armor.

"…"

The armored warrior—showing almost no trace of the boy I'd met this morning appeared, clad in equipment utterly foreign to our modern age.

The suit of armor somehow felt even bigger than before, possibly

because he'd showed himself to me as a child—no, in fact, it must have been bigger.

He said he will have made a full recovery—that he'd be fully restored.

He'd have used his energy drain to further power himself up before appearing at this field—and he'd lost whatever talkative nature he had as a boy.

He appeared on time and said nothing.

He stood there in his thick suit of armor.

He wasn't the only one to grow quiet, either. So had Kanbaru to some degree once he appeared—before then, despite the feeling in the air, she'd managed to chatter on.

She must have felt the noxious force of all those "bad things" the first Aberration Slayer brought along with him—just as she felt ill before at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine and during our last visit to the abandoned cram school.

No. Even worse than those times.

As someone who shared a common vampiric origin with him, it didn't affect me, nor did it affect the two professionals, Miss Gaen and Episode—but the amount of careful preparation he'd put into this moment was as clear as night.

As Kanbaru's senior, I worried about her body and her mind, but it wasn't as if she'd leave now even if I told her to… Just as I wondered what to do—

"All right, then. Let's get this started nice and quick, then ended nice and quick," Miss Gaen said to break the ice.

Nothing about her tone suggested any real concern for her niece's condition—you didn't have to be me to recognize that her interest in ending this nice and quick had nothing to do with any consideration for her.

“Araragi, and First—this friendly lady who knows everything right here is gonna be in charge of your duel. I’ll make sure it’s a fair fight—and you’re going to let me act as judge.”

“Our promise,” the First spoke.

Not with the voice he’d taken from me.

It had turned into one of his own.

An elegant voice, profound and even entrancing.

“Thou shalt uphold our promise—Lady Izuko. As a fellow expert, I trust ye would not break such a promise.”

Sad words to hear spoken to someone as willing and ready to break promises as Miss Gaen—but he couldn’t have been serious when he said them, either.

He too was a sly and tested expert.

Someone not to be trusted, who wouldn’t think twice about handing someone—not poisoned, but consecrated tea.

“Oh, of course. I’ve never broken a promise in my life before, and I’ve never lied, either. Miss Izuko right here is all about integrity.”

I could tell by the way she refused to use her last name that she was being thorough when it came to hiding her identity from Kanbaru. Was she really that set on keeping her in the dark, though? Maybe the reveal of the fact that Kanbaru was her long-separated niece deserved a little more gravity, but seeing her go this far started to make me suspicious…

It even felt like it wasn’t about her relationship with Kanbaru so much as with Kanbaru’s mother, which is to say, Miss Gaen’s older sister.

Not that I needed to be thinking about that right now.

“Sir Araragi,” the first Aberration Slayer then said to me. “It seems Kissshot is not here—am I right to think that I will meet her once I

defeat thee in this duel?”

“Do whatever you want,” I replied. The two of us were close enough that, looking at him with sober eyes, I was overwhelmed by his intense presence—still, I didn’t drop my affectation. “I don’t intend on surviving a loss to you, so go ahead, meet her as much as you feel like.”

That is, I stopped myself from saying, if you can. Miss Gaen wouldn’t have wanted me to say that, not to mention the first Aberration Slayer.

If you can.

Facing him now, I couldn’t see him meeting Shinobu just to give her an honest apology—Kanbaru seemed mistaken when it came to that.

It wasn’t love.

It wasn’t gratitude.

It wasn’t loyalty.

Yet it wasn’t pure hate, resentment, or rebellion, either—as much as I hated to admit it, his feelings towards Shinobu were probably very close to mine.

To the point that they might be the same.

As my relationship to her—of love and hate.

I loved her, and I hated her.

So, in fact, the first Aberration Slayer wouldn’t know himself until it came down to it—he probably wouldn’t know until the moment he saw Shinobu.

How would he act then?

Would he love her, or would he kill her?

Was he being honest—or deceitful?

Wouldn't the answer to that question be decided in the moment?

…Not that the moment would ever come.

Even so, it was wrong to sympathize or empathize with him—perhaps I was complicit in the deception, but I only needed to win this duel to turn it into honesty and sincerity.

It was wrong.

To feel sorry for him.

You have to respect a being who spent four hundred years coming back to life, no matter who he is—Mèmè Oshino would surely say.

"You don't intend on surviving? Gotta love it. Don't say such alarming things, thrall of Heartunderblade…which is I guess both of you," Episode stumbled over his words—he must not have remembered my actual name. Miss Gaen now called me Araragi (not "Koyomin"), but he probably didn't remember names unless he had a specific interest in doing so… Not that I was any better, since I only knew him as Episode.

And what about the first Aberration Slayer's name?

This would probably end without me ever learning it.

"He's right, Araragi," Miss Gaen continued where Episode left off. "That is alarming. You shouldn't say that—haven't you been listening to us? What's about to take place is like a ceremony of sorts. You could call it a duel dedicated to a god—not something either of you will be dying from."

Come over here, she beckoned me with her hand.

I suppose enough time had passed since the accident in the open lot that she was finally allowing me to approach her. Miss Gaen touched my face.

"Okay. Now you're set," she said.

It didn't feel like anything had happened, but she must have undone

Ononoki's footprint from the left half of my face.

The protection had been removed.

Now no footprint was there to defend me.

"The preparations are complete. And now you're ready to fight too, Araragi. Aren't you?"

"The preparations, complete? With that? Hold on one moment—what of thy link, Sir Araragi?"

The first Aberration Slayer was the one to voice his doubts.

"Surely ye have no intention of dueling me—in such a weak state?"

"…"

"My word, it seems thy bond with Kissshot was nowhere as strong as I'd feared—I find it hard to believe she would dare send her servant to battle while so powerless."

I couldn't see because of his face guard, but he must have been sneering, not that I could blame him for thinking that.

Had I wanted to cover all my bases for this duel, I'd have restored my link to Shinobu, then had her drink my blood, strengthening my body to its limit before arriving here.

There lay the difference between this moment and my battle against Miss Kagenui—which actually made all the difference, but in any case, I'd be facing off against an aberration in an almost entirely human state.

This might have been my first time heading into battle at this much of a power disadvantage.

But there's a first time for everything.

Yes, Shinobu had holed up and refused to leave, but that wasn't the only reason our link hadn't been restored—this was, in its own way, something I wanted.

I didn't want to win using Shinobu's strength.

I wanted to win and become her strength.

Of course, it wasn't as if I'd shown up with neither prospects nor plans—even if my opponent claimed to have made a full recovery, he had to be far from fully restored.

And—even if I was wrong.

No matter what happened—win or lose, love or hate, I knew my opponent's intentions would never come to fruition. It was the least I could risk in a duel against such an adversary.

People should never get into fights they think they can't lose.

Of course, I wasn't sure if that held for vampires…

"Very well, then—however, Lady Izuko, in this case I would ask thee to compose a form for this duel that would properly handicap us. And I'll have no objectionable excuses coming from thee."

"Of course not. My plan was to go with a universal dueling format that's existed throughout the ages—one that would allow you two to compete on pretty fair terms," Miss Gaen proposed as she walked toward the stand used for morning announcements—from which she took a cylindrical object that she must have placed there beforehand.

A bamboo sword. The kind the kendo club used.

"I guess you could call it an imaginary version of the enchanted blade Kokorowatari—though there is of course some spiritual energy flowing through it. Yeah, just think of it as a stun gun that you can use on each other," Miss Gaen said—plunging it into the ground.

As bamboo swords are built with round tips, she shouldn't have been able to do this, but she pierced the ground like it was a peg using only one hand.

I was surprised by the strength in her slender arms, but then realized it was thanks to the sword's spiritual energy.

“We’re going to have you two stand on both sides of this bamboo sword, backs turned to each other. From there, you’ll take ten steps forward on my count—and the battle will begin after the tenth. Run towards this bamboo blade, and whoever scores the first sword strike on his opponent wins. I guess you could call it a setup out of a Japanese-style Western,” Miss Gaen explained, letting go of the sword. “Or maybe an unusual variation on beach flags. Of course, you shouldn’t just give up if your opponent is the first to grab the hilt—you can still take the sword from him and score a strike. The match will only be judged by who can score the first sword strike—fair enough? First will have longer to travel because ten of his wide strides will take him farther than ten from someone as short, and short-legged, as Araragi. Not to mention that armor.”

“Indeed, this armor is not light,” the first Aberration Slayer responded.

Still, he was a vampire—even if you took the weight of his equipment into consideration, he’d have to be nimble… And also, it felt like Miss Gaen was kind of insulting me there with that comment about my short stature and legs…

Did I do something to make her dislike me?

“Allow me to confirm—a glancing blow from this bamboo blade will not count as a strike, will it? May I assume that this battle will be decided only by effective, decisive strikes?”

“Of course. I’m going by the standards of modern kendo when it comes to that—though the rules themselves are anything goes. A strike to the legs is still a strike.”

“So you mean to say,” the armored warrior continued with a shrug, “what ye’ve in fact set forth—are not rules to ensure a fair fight, but rather considerations so that Sir Araragi doth not perish in our duel. Quite astute.”

“Well, I don’t want my big brother Mèmè getting mad at me. He’s scary when he’s mad,” Miss Gaen said, not explicitly denying the observation. “Any other questions?” she rushed to change the topic.

“No—what objections could I make to such a simple agreement? I do suppose ’tis preferable to a jumble of rules. Though I must say—in my hands, a glancing blow from any sword, even one made of bamboo, could bring Sir Araragi close to death. Would that then be considered an effective strike?”

“Sure, we can say that,” Miss Gaen nodded without a moment’s hesitation. “I guess that would be the more convenient arrangement for you—is that fine with you, Araragi?”

“Well, not really,” I replied as she turned her attention to me, “but I have to say I am.”

“Excellent—any questions from you, Araragi?”

“None about the rules… I’m an amateur when it comes to swords and fighting, though. Do you think I could get some expert instruction on at least this ten-pace run you’re talking about?”

“Expert instruction?”

From me? On swords?

Miss Gaen tilted her head in confusion, but I wasn’t referring here to any experts on the supernatural.

I wanted an expert when it came to full-tilt sprints.

An athlete who specialized in straight-line movement.

Japan’s best short-distance runner—Suruga Kanbaru.

In other words, my junior, who was off to the side feeling sick.

“Okay. I think it’d be fair to add a handicap on that level. It’s half past seven right now, so…the duel can begin at eight on the dot. Go and get warmed up, the both of you.”

031

“Estimating based on your height, I’d say that your stride length is about seventy-two centimeters. In other words, ten steps would be seven meters and twenty centimeters. Just as you’d use one set of strategies to run a marathon and another to run a hundred-meter dash, you can use yet another set of strategies to run a seven-meter sprint—but in this case, the real issue might be how to ensure you have enough stamina left over.”

Kanbaru explained this (using the metric system) as she touched and squished my legs—it felt more like a massage than some sort of warmup, but she was the expert here.

“What do you mean, the real issue?”

“It’s not all over once you finish the race—you still have to grab the bamboo sword and get a strike in, don’t you?”

“Oh. Right.”

Even if I won our footrace and was the first to grab the hilt, that wouldn’t matter if I then collapsed in exhaustion—similarly, if I focused only on speed and carried too much momentum, there was the strong possibility that I’d overshoot the sword sticking out of the ground. Then what would I do? It’d be like putting the cart before the horse, or rather, I’d just be making an ass of myself.

“So I’ll have to accelerate and decelerate correctly in the space of just seven meters… Maybe I should practice?”

“No, I don’t think you should.”

“Because we’d be revealing our hand to the opponent?”

I glanced over at the first Aberration Slayer—he wasn’t doing much of anything in particular. He just sat there on the stand for morning

announcements where the bamboo sword had been until moments earlier, his arms crossed like a warrior preparing for battle. If you stood a flag and flew a banner behind him, it'd be a scene straight out of the Warring States period.

"It doesn't look to me like he's paying much attention to us," I said.

"It's not about our hand or anything. You wouldn't be able to do an all-out sprint when the time came if you also did some for practice."

"Oh, right."

"I know I just said your stride was seventy-two centimeters, but that's when you're walking. It'd probably go up to eighty running—which means you'd arrive at the seventy-two-centimeter mark in exactly nine steps. If you count your steps as you run, that should serve as a rough guide—though it'd only be a rough one."

"Okay. So I need to count."

"1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13."

"Why the Fibonacci Sequence again?"

"6, 0, 8, 6, 5, 5, 5, 6, 7, 0, 2, 3, 8, 3, 7, 8, 9, 8, 9, 6, 7, 0, 3, 7, 1, 7, 3, 4, 2, 4, 3, 1, 6, 9, 6, 2, 2, 6, 5, 7, 8, 3, 0, 7, 7, 3, 3, 5, 1, 8, 8, 9, 7, 0, 5, 2, 8, 3, 2, 4, 8, 6, 0, 5, 1, 2, 7, 9, 1, 6, 9, 1, 2, 6, 4."

"Why a sublime number?"

"How did you know that?"

"If anything, how did you say that?"

"I guessed about half of them. Did I get it right?"

"Yeah. Amazing."

Talk about luck.

Too much luck, in fact.

Forget any numbers, she was the sublime one here.

In any case, nine steps. I couldn't remember where I'd heard it, but nine steps was, coincidentally enough, the amount of space kendo practitioners opened between one another.

"So one rough standard could be to accelerate during the first three, go at full speed during the middle three, and slow down during the final three."

"Okay… By the way, he's not going to be 7.2 meters away, right? It's hard to tell because of the armor, but how far away do you think someone his size will be?"

Kanbaru must have estimated my stride based on my height and while the first Aberration Slayer looked shorter than me when I saw him as a boy this morning, that of course was irrelevant now.

You'd think that the average height four centuries ago was lower, but he seemed pretty big to me given the size of his armor. That boy couldn't possibly be inside that armor as-is though from the looks of it, the suit was easily seven feet tall…

Maybe about the size of Dramaturgy?

Now that I thought about it, I fought that vampire hunter on this field too…

"Umm." Kanbaru faced the stand and eyeballed him. "It's kinda hard to guess since he's sitting, but…I'd say about a one-meter stride, 1.1 meters running?"

"A one-meter stride so ten meters in ten steps?"

Giving me a three-meter advantage. It sounded like a negligible distance but was pretty significant in an ultra-short sprint not to mention my opponent's full suit of armor.

"Of course, that's not set in stone. He could waddle along with tiny little steps."

"Little steps… I think he has a little more dignity than that."

Then again, there was no real reason to go out of our way and take

extra-long strides…

I guess our pride guaranteed our good behavior here.

“Oh, and another thing. Be careful not to twist your feet around when you turn after the ten steps. The trick is to turn around with your non-dominant foot as the axis, not your torso. Like this,” Kanbaru said, demonstrating with a twirl.

This was a basketball move, not anything to do with running, but seeing it up close was indeed helpful—of course, the armored warrior by the stand got to see this move as well, but you couldn’t pull off anything so light-footed while wearing heavy armor.

“Okay. That’s about all I can teach you on the spot, but I think what’s really important here is the swordplay after you grab that blade. Even if you get it, all your hard work will be for nothing if he dodges your attack and takes it from you, then uses it to smack you.”

“You’re right—but as far as that goes, what will be, will be. I’d be asking for too much from you otherwise.”

“Oh? I’d even switch in for you if I could.”

“You really are loyal, you know that?”

True, our chances of victory seemed like they’d be far higher if I let Kanbaru fight this duel for me—but of course I couldn’t do that. I was happy to hear her say it, but…

I wanted a switch to flip inside of me.

“In that case, why don’t I lend you my shoes? We wear the same size, right?”

“Oh, thanks…”

“It’s normally risky to wear shoes you’re not used to, but these have got to be better than those weird things you’re wearing right now.”

“Don’t call them weird.”

“Those shoes of yours that have to be tied in a unique way.”

“I’m the only one to blame for how my shoes are tied.”

“Here,” she said, already handing me her shoes—well, whether or not my shoes were strange, hers did seem a lot easier to run in. I decided to take her up on her kind offer.

I was wearing Kanbaru’s track jacket, and I was wearing her shoes. I must have seemed like a real Kanbaru freak right about now. Maybe I needed to ask Karen how to join the fan club.

“Ack, they’re all warm on the inside…”

“I kept them warm for you.”

“Who are you, Hideyoshi Toyotomi?”

“Ooh, Araragi-senpai’s weird shoes…”

“Stop highlighting the fact they’re weird.” Especially if she was also highlighting that they were mine.

“My fatigue just melts away when I wear these. I feel so elevated that I might just level up.”

“I’m pretty sure that my shoes aren’t a Dragon Quest item… And hold on, do you actually wear a bigger shoe size than me?”

With this, I’d received my running instruction as well as a pair of shoes, and I’d had a good bit of fun on top. The time was now 7:55 p.m.—just five minutes until the duel.

It was at this moment that my cell phone rang—not because of an incoming call, but because a message had arrived.

“Really? What awful manners. You need to turn your phone off during a duel, you know,” Episode grumbled from afar—I’d never heard anything about dueling manners, but I couldn’t say anything back to him, either.

I was almost glad my phone rang now, because I’d have lost the

duel for sure if it had gone off as I ran my ten paces. I went to check what it said before switching off the power, assuming either Karen or Tsukihi was warning me about the punishment awaiting me once I got back home.

Of all the people, it had been sent by Tsubasa Hanekawa.

032

“Huh… What is this?”

A message from Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Yet the body and subject were blank, with only a lone photograph attached. The e-mail seemed odd enough already□but the bizarre photo that appeared to be a selfie was truly beyond description.

That Tsubasa Hanekawa.

Had taken a selfie in my room, wearing my clothes.

That’s what this one-of-a-kind photo showed (well, I guess it wasn’t one of a kind since it was on both our phones as data).

“Wh-What’s been going on at school while I’ve been away?”

My desire to see class president among class presidents Miss Hanekawa in street clothes had come true in an incomprehensible way, but I couldn’t just sit there and enjoy the moment.

The clothes were mine in the first place, an outfit I was familiar with… While part of me felt like accepting the situation as it presented itself, the whole thing gave off such a strange vibe.

I was wearing Kanbaru’s jacket and shoes and standing next to her as she wore my hoodie and weird shoes, and looking at a photo of Hanekawa wearing a full outfit belonging to me in my room? What a mess of a situation.

“What happened to Hanekawa… Kanbaru, do you know anything?”

“No, I don’t have a clue… The only thing I could think of is that after her house burned down, she got introduced to Karen and Tsukihi through Senjogahara-senpai and asked them if she could

stay at your home."

"That's probably it! …Wait, a fire? Her house burned down?! When did that happen?!"

"Oh, right. I guess you didn't know. In a nutshell, her home burned down on the first day of second term."

In a nutshell, indeed.

No way… I thought I'd been on a rough adventure since the last day of summer break, but it seemed like Hanekawa was having a tougher time…

Still, Kanbaru amazed me. She knew just how fanatical I was about Hanekawa, and yet she managed not to tell me for just about the whole day? Is this what Senjogahara meant when she described her as frightening? Oh, but Kanbaru and Hanekawa didn't have much of a relationship… Now that I thought about it, hadn't Kanbaru muttered something about Hanekawa while we were surrounded by flames at the abandoned cram school?

Hm? Could that fire have been□

"What's this? Looks like she's getting to the good stuff herself□what'll you do, Koyomin?"

Leaping in as if to sneak a peek at my cell phone, Miss Gaen called me Koyomin for the first time since that morning.

"Wait… The good stuff? Miss Ga□" Nope. "Miss Izuko, is there something you know? About Hanekawa□wait, do you know Hanekawa? And what do you mean, what'll I do?"

"I know everything□I'm trying to say it's a tiger, Koyomin. Ironically, it was also a tiger that saved you at the abandoned cram school. It seems that Tsubasa has made up her mind and decided to face that great tiger who wields its purgatorial flames. Heh, no wonder Mèmè was scared of her. I never expected her to make such a move. Still…it is convenient."

"Convenient… How?"

A tiger?

Wait, no—Shinobu had done all that talking about cats, too—what exactly was happening on Hanekawa's side right now? People said they knew, and even explained it to me, but I wasn't getting any kind of clear picture at all.

The only thing I knew—something pretty strange was taking place over there if Hanekawa had sent me a picture like this.

A distress signal—no, more like a cry for help.

"That's right, your precious Tsubasa is in trouble. So, what will you do, Koyomin?"

"What will I do? Again, like what?"

"If you'll allow your lady friend here who knows everything to give you a quick rundown, it's not actually just Tsubasa who's in trouble—your girlfriend, Senjogahara, is as well."

"What?"

It was Kanbaru who reacted first. You couldn't blame her, when Hitagi Senjogahara stood at the top of this ever-faithful junior's internal hierarchy, but it's not as if I wasn't surprised too. I mean, what about our phone call just now? It's not like she'd…shown any signs…or maybe she had, and…

…I hadn't noticed.

How could I be so negligent?

"Those girls just might be going up in flames as we speak—if you want to go rescue them, you should go as soon as humanly possible. Forget about this meaningless duel," Miss Gaen said, as if to lay it on me emotionally.

"…"

"That's what I mean when I say convenient. It makes things easier for me if you don't take part in this duel. Because it'd be an issue if

you died—just as the First said, we've tried to set things up in a way that should keep you from dying, but it's not as if we can avoid it no matter what. I can't break the rules, which means I'd really appreciate it if you did instead. And this is good for you too, Koyomin. Now you have a perfect reason for calling the duel off."

Miss Gaen shut me down and silenced me completely.

I knew I was getting in a fight that no one wanted me in, but this made me keenly aware of just how little my involvement was desired—it made me realize there was no self-improvement involved in what I was doing, only self-satisfaction.

"It's time to choose, Koyomin," Miss Gaen said—in a nasty tone. "Stay here to fight in an idle duel, or run off to save Tsubasa and Senjogahara. Will you choose Shinobu, or will you choose Tsubasa, or will you choose Senjogahara?"

Choose.

Compare and choose.

A multiple-choice relationship problem.

Compare that which is important to me—and define which is more important.

Score them and differentiate them.

"Out of those three—whom do you love the most?" Miss Gaen seemed to joke. "Would a time limit of five minutes not be enough? Really, I think you could come up with an answer in five seconds. Shinobu hasn't even come here, while Tsubasa is your savior and Senjogahara is your girlfriend—oh?"

Still wordless, I handed the phone to Kanbaru—Miss Gaen was right. It took longer than an instant to come up with the answer, but five seconds was enough.

Just because an answer is simple to come up with, though, that doesn't mean it's an easy one.

Ah, so this is what it means to choose.

In that case, the right to decide—the final say—isn't really desirable.

But I had to choose.

And I had to decide.

"Kanbaru. Please handle this."

"I've got it," she answered at once.

I knew that this answer wasn't the one that Kanbaru, who treated Senjogahara like an older sister, wanted to hear—still, she nodded immediately.

Don't mistake who you're trying to save here, Kanbaru had said to me once—but she'd know better than anyone that there was no such thing as a right answer to such a question.

Not being able to make a mistake isn't necessarily right.

"I just need to go to your home?"

"Yeah. You're free to use that phone, so tell Karen to let you in—I doubt Hanekawa is still there, but there might be something left in my room. I'll be right behind you, so I want you to look into it until then."

Roger that.

Kanbaru was already off running by the time she signed off. It was hard to believe she had on my weird shoes as she sprinted away from Naoetsu High's athletic field at a speed faster than the eye could see, drilling into the earth with each step.

"Are you in your right mind?" asked Miss Gaen, appalled. Or maybe more like she couldn't begin to understand my decision. "That's unthinkable—do you really only consider whatever is in front of your eyes? How do you think Tsubasa and Senjogahara would feel if they learned about your decision here? Isn't chasing after that girl still the right thing to do?"

“…”

“True, Suruga Kanbaru is far more mobile than you, and she might be able to handle both situations with her running speed—and Tsubasa might be able to face her troubles on her own. You’re the only one who can fight here, so it might be right for you to stay behind, but that’s all logic—it’s might this and might that. People have emotions. Don’t you think she sent you that message believing in you? And you’re going to betray her trust like this?”

Miss Gaen continued in her detached tone, but it also felt like the convenience she’d get out of me not taking the duel wasn’t her only reason for saying all this.

The thought helped calm my mind to some small degree.

So she had a regular side to her, too—though maybe I didn’t.

“After betraying them like this, those two might never trust you again,” Miss Gaen said as if to hammer the point home.

“Maybe,” I replied. Coolly, and without shame. “But I believe in them. From the bottom of my heart. In Hanekawa, and in Senjogahara.”

I believed they’d understand.

Those two, who treated someone as un-special as me in such a special way—would never betray my trust.

Not those two special people in my life.

Not Tsubasa Hanekawa, not Hitagi Senjogahara.

“I believe they’ll understand—that over any savior or any lover, the man known as Koyomi Araragi—is going to put a little girl first.”

033

Perhaps the expression little girl was a bit too overpowering for the uninitiated, but whatever the case, Miss Gaen didn't say another word as she stepped away from me—no, to be exact, she did mutter something to herself, so low that I could barely make it out.

"It'd be nice if I could ever trust anyone enough to just hand them my phone."

Then, after one more actor went missing from the stage that was the Naoetsu High athletic field, eight o'clock came at last. Time came for the duel to begin—and a change occurred.

Something came raining down from the cloudy night sky—or maybe it would be better to say it came slashing down.

It was a blade—a great katana.

A Japanese sword is made to slash, not rain down—yet it clearly fell like a single bolt of lightning from high in the sky to the center of the field.

Its tip squarely hit the bamboo sword Miss Gaen had thrust into the ground earlier. She said spiritual energy or something had been used to strengthen it, to the point that you could stick it into the ground, yet it tore like a piece of vinyl tape, splitting exactly in two.

Of course it did.

What good was spiritual energy in the face of a great katana? Miss Gaen's so-called imaginary version of the enchanted blade Kokorowatari was no match.

How could the imaginary ever rival the real thing?

What had come flying from the sky was the aberration-

exterminating blade known before any other as the Aberration Slayer—the enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

It was as if the bamboo sword never existed in the first place.

Its presence was such that it seemed to always have been there, sticking out of the ground—and with that, the weapon signifying the start of our duel changed from a bamboo sword to an actual blade.

My head shot up to look at the sky at the same time as the armored warrior's—but there was nothing to be found there. Not the moon, not even a flying bat.

Even so, we knew. Who now owned this sword—and therefore who threw it between me and him.

A vampire known as the Aberration Slayer.

Whom I called Shinobu Oshino—and he, Kissshot.

Once an iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire—and now the dregs of one.

"Hah. Gotta love it," Episode said with an insincere laugh. Maybe he could see wherever she was. "So, the master has decided to provide the tool for this conflict between her slaves—or maybe the prize? Like she's saying she'd give the winner that enchanted blade."

"Maybe. Whatever the case, that bamboo sword I went to all the trouble of preparing just got split in half, so we're just going to have to use the real thing. Koyomin, First. We're running a little late, but why don't you get started—put your backs to one another around that sword, just as originally planned," Miss Gaen said, ordering us around as if nothing too unexpected had taken place—was she trying to say she'd accounted for even Shinobu's actions here?

In that case, I'd just have to play into her hands.

Yes, right.

I'd been thinking how dull this would be with a bamboo sword—not

to mention, it changed nothing about what we needed to do.

I would run, grab the hilt, and score a strike.

It's all either of us had.

It's all there was, and yet it felt like our duel would now be fought under a completely different set of rules—and this seemed to go for the first Aberration Slayer as well, but not in the same way.

Because of his powerful sense of the enchanted blade Kokorowatari being his personal property, made of his own flesh and blood from the start, perhaps it didn't move him to see it presented as a tool or offered as a reward.

No.

I couldn't see his expression behind his face guard, but he seemed clearly displeased by this turn of events. In fact, as he faced me on the other side of the sword, he voiced his disappointment.

"She's come so close, so why doth my master—why doth our master, Kissshot, so stubbornly refuse to show herself?"

"…"

"Is she that loath to meet me, Sir Araragi? What say ye? Are my efforts meaningless? Is this turmoil between us nothing more than a nuisance to Kissshot?"

And ye—he asked.

"What about ye, Sir Araragi? What meaning do ye find in this duel?"

"You wouldn't understand what this means to me. I don't know if anyone would," I replied.

Maybe I shouldn't have been exchanging words with him like this right before our fight, from opposite sides of the blade—but I had to say something when I considered that this would be our last conversation regardless of what happened.

“You might be some kind of special, chosen person—I’m not special, and I might not even be chosen. It could be that no one can replace you, while anyone could replace me. But you see.” I turned my back—to the first Aberration Slayer, standing there on the opposite side of the blade. “You can’t become me. There might be an infinite amount of replacements for me, but only I am me.”

“…”

“You’re not me, and I’m not you. That’s how it is, right?”

Though I phrased it as a question, I received no reply—I could only hear the sound of armor rattling.

He must have turned his back to me.

Yes, it was the position he needed to take to begin the duel, but it also seemed to symbolize how irreconcilable the two of us were.

Even if he was the first and I was the second.

Even if we were both servants and both slaves.

We weren’t the same—and we wouldn’t understand each other.

“One…”

Miss Gaen began the count once she saw us turn our backs—and I took a step forward. Behind me, I could sense the first Aberration Slayer moving as well.

“Two-o-o. Three-e-e.”

The vague lack of energy in her voice must have been intentional—Miss Gaen was doing everything she could to scrub any deeper meaning from this duel. Just as Oshino had turned all my battles into games during spring break.

“Fo-o-our.”

But not everything goes to plan, even if you are someone like Miss Gaen who knows everything—one person can’t control other people

that conveniently, to say nothing of aberrations. No matter how much of a farce she made this duel out to be, nothing guaranteed that its outcome would be a laughing matter.

“Fi-i-ive. Si-i-ix.”

Even then—did the first Aberration Slayer really not know? Why Shinobu would come close enough to toss the sword at us but not make an appearance? No, even I didn’t know why until now.

I’d assumed she’d holed herself up simply because she didn’t want to meet the first Aberration Slayer, or because she didn’t want to take on any more trouble—but maybe it wasn’t that Shinobu didn’t want to meet the First. Maybe she couldn’t, I realized.

“Se-e-even.”

Yes, that’s where we differed.

Shinobu already hung on the edge of death when we met during spring break—and even after that, I’d only seen the true and full Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade in passing.

But four hundred years ago, when she interacted with the first Aberration Slayer…

She was in her prime.

At her most beautiful, her most splendid, her most radiant, her most sublime, her most powerful—that was the woman she was then.

Which is why—she couldn’t stand it.

Showing her depleted, weakened, childish self to the first Aberration Slayer, both partner and fated rival to her in the past, would be—to come out and say it, embarrassing.

She felt embarrassed to be seen in her changed state.

She didn’t want to be seen as the dregs of her former self.

As a part and cause of the aberrational phenomena occurring in this

town, the First had to know about Shinobu turning into a child, but being seen by him was a different matter altogether.

I felt pathetic to have met this duel so unashamedly, not understanding feelings as obvious as these—but I also wasn't so magnanimous that I'd go out of my way to tell the First.

Even if I did, he probably wouldn't understand how she felt—to him, Shinobu, or rather, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, was special.

She was perfect.

A different person from the Shinobu I knew now.

I also felt like I understood why I always had such a hard time communicating with him—it was as if we'd been conversing across a mystery novel's narrative trick. We'd been talking about two entirely different people but acting as though they were one and the same.

Four hundred years.

It was so obvious that I actually didn't understand it at all—this once again taught me just how long that was.

"Ei-i-ight."

But who out there could laugh and call him old-fashioned or off the mark? The fact that Shinobu was now bound this way was unusual from the start—in her more than five hundred years, looking that way and being that weak was exceptional for her.

I knew what the First would think.

He'd want to return her to the way she was.

Not as her thrall—but as an expert.

To the way she was when they exterminated aberrations together.

What exactly would make Shinobu happy?

I'd bound her in unhappiness over spring break—and she'd put up with that unhappiness, but once reminded of her past, of four hundred years ago, could she still feel the same way?

"Ni-i-ine."

Kanbaru had told her.

If she met the first Aberration Slayer and found her mind siding with him—then she needed to leave me and spend her days by his side.

Kanbaru really was amazing for being able to say that.

She wasn't just able to say it, either. She could probably do it.

To make sure that didn't happen—I'd need to continue being someone special to Shinobu. That seemed to be my answer to this duel's meaning.

I wanted to keep being that special someone for Shinobu Oshino.

The girl who chose to live alongside me.

"Ten!"

I turned as I heard the word—spinning my body around my right foot as Kanbaru had taught me, so that I could sprint those seven meters.

I took my first step.

I accelerated toward the sword rising out of the field into which it had been plunged—and as I did, I saw a jarring and utterly unexpected scene.

The handicap for this duel consisted of two parts.

First, as ten of my steps created a distance different from ten of the first Aberration Slayer's, I would need to travel seven meters to reach the enchanted blade Kokorowatari, while he needed to go ten. I would have a three-meter advantage, and he would be three

meters behind—a numerical gap that could not be closed.

But there was another part—the fact that this warrior in his armor should be at a disadvantage in a footrace. I hadn't realized just how easy it was for him to compensate for this point. I'd forgotten that my opponent was an expert who didn't care about appearances when it came to exterminating aberrations.

And so.

As he, the first Aberration Slayer, walked ten steps according to Miss Gaen's count with his back turned to me—he'd been taking off the massive armor wrapped around his entire body.

A tall, fit, and stunning young man with long, tied-back hair emerged from inside what had been empty in the abandoned cram school—and he dashed toward the enchanted blade Kokorowatari in order to cut me down.

That boy Aberration Slayer.

This is how he matured.

He even looked cool as he ran! Dammit!

What a figure he'd cut standing next to a legendary vampire—he wore Western clothing inappropriate for anyone in a Japanese suit of armor. The design of his clothes resembled that of a swallowtail coat, not something very suited to running, but it must have felt like athletic wear compared to being clad in armor.

He of course didn't step on any of the armor he scattered along the field during his ten steps, and he was already preparing to reach for the great katana.

I was now in a full sprint, keeping with the instruction I received from my sharp-eyed tutor, but god, this wasn't even going to be close! And I'd been conveniently ignoring the fact that a wider walking stride also meant a wider running stride. People with long legs are fast, I'm telling you!

Since he was running without the leg irons that was his armor, it

was impossible for me to win this race in my current condition.

Naturally, his right hand grabbed the enchanted blade first.

I'd yet to run even half of my seven meters—was I just a slow runner or what?

The young Aberration Slayer, formerly the boy Aberration Slayer, grabbed the hilt of the enchanted blade but did not stop there—he continued sprinting forward at the exact same speed. This of course wasn't him over-shooting his mark. His intentions seemed to be to use his momentum to cut me down.

The fact that he didn't make use of the difference in strength between us to torture or bully me commended him as a genuine warrior—though from my perspective, it also meant he wouldn't be providing me with any openings.

The enchanted blade Kokorowatari.

The Aberration Slayer's sword—a sword that slew only aberrations.

I'd lost most of my vampiric abilities now that my link to Shinobu had been severed—though I only had the strength of an average human, that didn't mean I had lost all of my nature as a vampire.

The enchanted blade's sharp edge would cut well—the bamboo sword provided by Miss Gaen was one thing, but this sword created for the purpose of exterminating aberrations would have an immediate effect were it to so much as graze me.

At this point, I had in essence lost.

I guess you could say things were only progressing as they always do—but if there was ever a time when I couldn't lose, couldn't be cut down, and couldn't stop moving forward, it was now.

I took another step in Kanbaru's shoes.

The moment I did, one of them came off. Maybe they were the wrong size after all, but that didn't matter. I continued stepping forward, with the other foot.

Ahead toward the armored warrior holding the great katana.

Well, no, he wasn't an armored warrior now that he'd tossed that armor off this young man who held his sword ready even as he charged toward me was a berserker. What did that make me, empty-handed and hopeless? Cannon fodder?

The distance between us suddenly shrank.

For every one of my steps, the First took three we were now in melee range. He held the sword high over his head, and

"Ha!"

He laughed.

"Ha!"Haha!"Hahaha!"Hahahaha!"Hahahahaha!"Hahahahahahaha!"

Maybe something was funny.

Or maybe something was sad as his laughter bellowed out.

He swung the sword, held high, down toward the tip of my shoulder sparing no ounce of his physical strength as a vampire thrall.

Forget me.

He handled the sword as if he wanted to split the field itself in two in fact, it'd be no surprise if he did.

It'd be a surprise if he didn't, in fact.

If there was a reason he didn't.

It's that he was a vampire.

And I a mockery of a vampire.

It was the difference between the first Aberration Slayer, who'd been a vampire ever since the day his blood was sucked four hundred years ago, and me, who'd been a vampire for no more than two weeks during spring break. The differences in our careers

brought about a difference in results.

The inarguable pinnacle of immortality—which meant surviving being torn to pieces or turned to ashes, and continuing on and on and further on…

Something that Shinobu herself, the presence at both of our roots, once pointed out…

Vampires' defensive abilities aren't particularly high—because their immortality acts as a defense itself.

In other words, while I didn't know how he may have been back when he was a pure human, a pure warrior, a pure expert—right now.

He walked the night as a vampire.

He fought at night, and paid no attention whatsoever to defense.

He neglected himself.

Even at the abandoned cram school, he made no attempt to dodge Kanbaru's punches or tackles—and he was no different without his armor.

He held nothing back as he swung the lengthy great katana as if to split the field in half. Even though there was no need for that. He only needed to nick me with his enchanted blade to end the battle.

And I—found his torso, left wide open by his swing, and slapped it on.

I still carried all the momentum from my full sprint, which meant it looked like I countered his attack with a palm strike as I ran past—but in any case, the talisman I'd peeled from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine took to him.

It took ahold of him.

"Hah—ah, ha, ha,
hahahaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!"

His roaring laughter turned to a shriek.

The sword he held aloft promptly dropped to the ground.

Of course it did, the slip of wonder-working paper was mighty enough to write off my five-million-yen debt and if you were to go all the way back, we'd used it to prevent the first Aberration Slayer's return to begin with.

I'd placed that directly on his body.

How could it not be effective? Especially now when the armor protecting the First had been cast aside.

"That's Mèmè's… Oh, so that's what's going on."

Miss Gaen's voice.

An expert, she understood instantly.

"What a surprise this, I'd really call unexpected. You took the duel I set up and turned it into a slap fight!"

No.

That's not what I did. Please stop.

Don't amuse yourself while I'm over here putting my life on the line.

Still, it was only natural for me to notice the talisman at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine as I awaited tonight's duel as Kanbaru and I amused ourselves with ritualistic dances, trying to get Shinobu to come out. The two of us had come to that very shrine to place it there, after all.

Still there was one thing.

In a different timeline in a different history traveled by me and Shinobu, the talisman placed on the shrine was something else.

It affected the world in the same way, but its effects were different.

That talisman was a little too powerful, and neither Shinobu nor I, with our aberrational nature, could so much as touch it—which would have meant that Kanbaru's right hand placed it there.

I understood that to mean that in that timeline, Koyomi Araragi never built the same kind of relationship with Shinobu Oshino that I had with her in this one.

If that was the meaning of that history.

And if this history had a meaning too—it meant the talisman could be reused. It could be removed, then placed in another location.

Of course, no matter how much Mèmè Oshino acted like he saw it all coming, there's no way he could have imagined something like this duel—not to mention, it was Kanbaru who brought up the actual idea: Couldn't you peel this thing off and take it with you to use somehow?

It probably didn't count at all under Miss Gaen's rules, and I of course couldn't let this end after a mere touch from my palm.

So.

I reached for the katana he dropped—and picked it up.

The fearsome Aberration Slayer's enchanted blade, Kokorowatari—this duel wouldn't end until I delivered a strike with it.

"Guh, ah, ah, ahh… Ki—"

As he began to break apart.

As he crumbled, he screamed.

"—ssshot, Kissshot, Kissshot, Kissshot, Kissshot, Kissshot—Ki-ki-ki-ki—"

He screamed—he screamed the name.

Of the one who met him four hundred years ago.

Who fought against him. Who fought with him.

The name of the monster—who turned him into a monster.

There was nothing I could say to the first Aberration Slayer and his rising voice. In fact, I couldn't so much as look at him.

But this dispelled my doubts. Any I might have had. My suspicion that reconciliation was nothing more than an excuse, and that he wanted to bring harm to Shinobu…

Now that I heard this voice, I finally believed it—what he wanted was to see her.

That didn't change anything, of course. He only continued to crumble.

Which isn't to say that he simply fell over—his form itself began to crumble—it broke apart.

Unable to maintain a human shape, unable to maintain his human form.

They began to pour out.

The tall, fit young man that was the first Aberration Slayer broke apart into pieces of the aberrations—he crumbled and sloshed into every one of his accumulated things, flooding forth like a cracked dam had finally burst.

Like a chipped blade—

The young Aberration Slayer's body lost its integrity, spilling all the aberrations it held.

A crab, a snail, a monkey, a snake, a cat, a bee, a phoenix, a tiger—a dog, a bear, a leopard, a zebra, a ladybug, a fox, a piece of coral, a camel, a sea slug, a cow, a lion, a giraffe, a crawfish, a shark, an ostrich, a wolf, a turtle, a deer, a goat, a chicken, a rabbit, a millipede, a slime mold, a tanuki, a lizard, a spider, a mole, a silkworm, a squirrel, a whale, an octopus, a dugong, a beetle, an otter, a crane, a turbo, an inchworm, a tadpole, an anteater, a flying

squirrel, a narwhal, a scorpion, an earthworm, a stick-bug, a swan, an oyster, an elephant, a carp, a llama, a sea otter, a shiitake, a sheep, an alligator, a cicada, a rhino, a sea urchin, a mouse, a sea lion, a parrot, a porcupine fish, a reindeer, a flounder, a pangolin, a jellyfish, a peacock, a mantis□came spilling out, as if there was no end to them.

All in a confused mess.

Mixed, mingling, and muddled.

Impossible to tell one from another.

He became all those “bad things” themselves.

He returned□he regressed.

The talisman had enough power to purify an entire shrine with its touch□so maybe it was obvious that, placed directly on his body, this would happen.

That doesn’t change the fact that the ghastly sight looked like madness itself.

Yet at the same time, it brought me relief.

I’ll admit I knew it was a false and phony feeling□but it felt so incredibly stressful for someone with a spirit as weak as mine to swing a blade at an opponent who took a human form and spoke human words, even if I did know he was an aberration… Especially when he was once a human. Now that he crumbled, I had an easier time wielding it.

I had an easier time.

Of ending it.

“Kissshot□kissshot□kiss□”

His voice crumbled, too. So too did his self.

His senses crumbled, as did his memories.

At this rate, all of him would scatter, all would be dust, nothing would be left behind—adding a swing of this sword to his crumbling existence would change nothing.

I would win the duel.

It would have meaning for me.

But it would be all but meaningless to him—were he to return to ash, the first Aberration Slayer would only be engulfed in eternal recurrence again.

He would never die.

Not for eternity.

He was an immortal among immortals—and neither Miss Gaen nor Episode could do anything about that. What can be done about an opponent who can never die?

In this sense, it didn't matter whether it was me or the others—when would he return next?

Another four hundred years later?

Five hundred years later—a thousand years later?

Even if an expert did seal him away, he'd outlive them in the end—and if he was incapable of dying, he couldn't even commit suicide.

Immortality that even he could not break down.

"s, sh—ot, ototot—■■■■■■■■■■■■■—■■■■—■■■■"

Now even his words held no meaning.

The whole of his body broke apart, spilled forth, and unraveled, leaving only his throat, still producing sounds—and it was to him that I spoke.

"Well… I don't know what age I'll live to—but if we can ever meet

again.”

If we can ever meet again.

Let’s meet again.

I then readied the too-long sword, the Aberration Slayer’s blade, made from his own flesh and blood, to this incomprehensible composite while it could still be called him, and

“■■■

called him by his name, called the name of her erstwhile thrall—she called the name of her erstwhile comrade-in-arms.

And ate.

Crying—she ate.

Gulping, gnashing, and gulping again.

She ate him—the shadow of her fist thrall, while he could still be called himself, turning him to her own flesh and blood. And by turning him to her flesh and blood, her prey and sustenance, her bone and body—she freed him from his eternal loop.

“I am glad we could meet. I believed we would never meet again. But never again shall we meet—for now I have one more important to me than thee. For now, I wish to be for him.”

The mockeries of aberrations, spread across the field—now came together.

They came to an end.

The parts that had created the Aberration Slayer, the dust and ashes that briefly covered this entire town—entered her stomach, without a speck left behind. No matter how massive their volume, she finished them all herself.

I don’t know how he heard her words, now that he had neither face nor expression—I don’t even know if he heard them. At the very least, though, I didn’t see my predecessor looking satisfied, or free of regret.

He’d been relieved of no burden, nor was he uplifted. Hearing the words spoken aloud did nothing to bring him comfort or any kind of salvation. Even so, after four hundred years—

His suicide had succeeded at last.

034

“Okay, then. So what happened after that, Araragi-senpai? C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! What’s the epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story?”

I’m so, so curious, so curious to know what happened next Ogi said, as if to rush me.

Not that I had anywhere to rush to however much I wanted to meet her expectations when she pressed me this way.

“I already told you what happened next as you know, or rather, as you were hoping, this connects everything together, right? I met up with Kanbaru, who’d gone ahead to my home to deal with the case of Hanekawa’s tiger. I headed to Hanekawa, while Kanbaru headed to Senjogahara.”

“I see, I see. Yes, I had heard that before so you made it in time for that, too. How wonderful. Again, I’m every bit as happy for you as I’d be if it happened to me. I do love Miss Hanekawa, you know,” Ogi said as perfunctorily as ever.

She and Hanekawa got along horribly.

Their relationship was all sharp edges.

“Speaking of which, does that mean Miss Hanekawa ended up being right when she had the idea that the former Heartunderblade and the first Aberration Slayer might be lovers? She really does know everything, doesn’t she.”

“Um… Wait, did I say anything about that?”

“Why, of course you did. You’d never hide anything from me!”

“Hm… Now that you mention it, I guess you might be right.”

“I suppose Miss Hanekawa wouldn’t get mad just because you decided to put her off until later. You know, it’s that chummy attitude of hers that I can’t stand. Oh, so what about whatever Miss Ononoki had been sent to handle while you were fighting the First? What could Miss Gaen have asked her to do?”

“Oh… Like I mentioned, I guess you could say that had to do with Sengoku… Basically, she had to take a little trip to get that talisman. That tween girl really is full of surprises. Or maybe you could just call her a true jack of all trades…”

“Yes, such a surprise. To think that a tween girl would live under the same roof as you□that she’d come to cohabit with you.”

You can kind of understand why Miss Gaen sees Miss Kagenui’s existence as bothersome, huh, Ogi remarked as if she already knew about Miss Gaen, but it’s not like they’d met, right?

Whatever the case, I was pretty sure that neither Miss Gaen nor Miss Kagenui had Ononoki staying at my home just so that I could cohabit with a tween girl.

“And while I’m sure that Miss Gaen was trying to further prevent things by using that talisman, it unfortunately didn’t go as planned because of my own mistake…”

“That’s right. Because Sengoku misused it, right?”

“Misused kind of paints her in a bad light…”

“Using a talisman to exorcise an immortal aberration almost sounds like something you’d do to a jiangshi… But would it be right to assume you went back and placed the talisman on the shrine once you were done?”

“Yeah… Only, reusing it that many times led to it being less effective, which might have led to what happened with Sengoku…”

“And it would be right to assume that this talisman was lost during the rebuilding of the shrine?”

“Um, well, probably…”

“What happened to li’l Episode after that?”

“Huh…?”

Li’l Episode? Why did she sound so pally? Not that it mattered.

“He took care of a little bit of the aftermath, then returned to his country—but I think he was really satisfied by the job. He hates vampires more than anything, and in the end, we managed to erase one from the world.”

“Hm… I see, I see. Well, senpai, thank you very much,” Ogi said, bowing her head. As she looked back up, her face was smiling. “Now all the pieces of the puzzle are in place. Well, some details do slightly contradict what I’ve heard until now, but we can overlook that. Tying up those kinds of paradoxical loose ends is part of the fun for the audience of all tales, which is to say me.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that… So much happened that I can’t even keep it all straight. I don’t know where I’d be if it wasn’t for you explaining everything.”

“Not at all. It’s what any Koyomist would do.”

“Koyomist? What’s that supposed to mean? Is it like being a Sherlockian?”

“Ha haa. These seams form along the overall picture because you try to hide things for whatever reason. As far as unreliable narrators go, Deishu Kaiki is already more than enough—I wouldn’t go so far as to say Sherlockian. I will be doing whatever I can for you, though.”

“You know, I really don’t understand why you’re so interested in my stories.”

If there is something you can do for me, I said to Ogi.

“I’d like to hear your tale—if there’s anything I don’t want you acting conceited about, it’s that.”

“It’s not that I’m acting conceited. Just as there is a best time for all

things, there is a best time for all tales—all the pieces need to be present. I'm a careful girl."

"Careful…"

"I do feel like I slipped up a bit at the very start—oh, that's it. I probably shouldn't call these replacements for my own tale, but I can provide an addendum or two to yours. You do have a lingering doubt, don't you?"

"Hm? About what?"

"Why you decided to meet Miss Kanbaru in the abandoned cram school to begin with—why you decided to wait for her in a deserted ruin, rather than at your own home. We still don't have an answer for that one, do we?"

"Oh—now that you mention it."

"Wasn't that probably part of Miss Gaen's plan?" Ogi said in a natural tone. Not as if she was solving any sort of mystery. "She probably made some kind of suggestion that worked on you—I assume it wouldn't be that difficult to lead you into doing something then, since your heart and mind had been weakened by what happened with Hachikuji."

"…Why? Even if that was true, why would Miss Gaen make a suggestion like that to me? Meeting there ended up aggravating all kinds of problems."

"What I'm saying is that she wanted them to be aggravated. Miss Gaen isn't at all a pacifist like my uncle—in other words, my guess is that everything might have gone according to her plans, all the way down to the very end, when Shinobu ate the first Aberration Slayer."

"…"

"Not that I have any grounds for saying that—it's just that I can't help but think that way when I see everything ending exactly the way it should in that final scene. It makes me feel like something's a little off."

Whatever the case, Ogi said.

That seemed to be as much as she wanted to touch on this topic, as she tried to hurry along to the next—something I didn't object to.

I wanted to avoid getting too deep into Miss Gaen's prevention strategy. I found it hard to believe I moved exactly as she'd planned, then or during Sengoku's case, but it probably would have been best if I had.

It really did make me wonder.

Why couldn't I just do things according to plan?

"So that's why you haven't encountered many aberrational tales since the start of second term, with the exception of Sengoku's—the ash once spread across town had vanished, lowering this percentage."

"Um… Well, I think it might be more complicated than just that."

Like Miss Gaen said.

The first Aberration Slayer disappearing did not at all mean peace going forward—which is exactly why she tried to install a new god at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Rather than controlling the situation, Miss Gaen must have seen it as a necessary step from a risk management perspective, but…

"Well, I will say we managed to settle something once and for all. Both me and Shinobu."

"I do wonder, though. What about Miss Kanbaru?"

"Hm?"

"Miss Kanbaru—I may not be a member of her fan club, but I am a supporter of hers. Her position as far as this whole affair just wouldn't stop weighing on my mind. She ended up becoming so deeply involved in the tale, and she never played any role greater than that of a helper—ha haa, the questions just don't stop, do they?

In the end, Miss Kanbaru never did end up learning that Miss Gaen is her aunt, right?"

"Yeah—she still thought she was Oshino's little sister when they parted ways…"

Parted ways, or rather, when she ran off Naoetsu High's athletic field, as the two never met back up after that.

I still felt guilt over being complicit in a lie told to a junior who'd done so much for me, but I guess you could say I kind of found it hard to believe it'd be a good thing for Kanbaru to learn she counted someone like Miss Gaen as a close relative…

"Not to mention, I never did figure out why Miss Gaen wanted Kanbaru for that job in the first place—she contributed a lot, but to say Miss Gaen planned for that to happen would be a little—"

"I think it was all in her plan. But," Ogi said, cracking a suggestive smile. "Her plan contained some miscalculations—in fact, I'm the result of just that."

"Huh?"

"No, we can talk about that next volume, which is to say next time. This was a lot to digest—I'd like to take a little recess first."

Though it might be more of the type you get in court than the one you get at school, Ogi added as she stood.

I probably should have mentioned this earlier, but we were talking in my room.

Koyomi's room, located on the second floor of the Araragi residence.

The date—March thirteenth.

The morning of my college exams.

My memory isn't entirely clear as to why my junior came to my room to play early in the morning the day of my exams, but I just

about don't care at this point when it comes to Ogi.

See her as someone who came and went as she pleased.

If I were to wake up and find her sleeping in my bed, I wouldn't be surprised.

"A court case, huh? I wonder how many years I'm gonna get."

"Who knows. You might even get the death sentence," Ogi joked—wait, what about that is a joke? "Well, I'll be heading home for the day. Let's meet again if you're still alive."

"Yeah… Be careful on your way back, Ogi."

"You know I will be," she said and began to leave my room, but as she touched the doorknob, she turned back.

"One more thing," she said. "Did Miss Shinobu end up eating all of her first thrall?"

"Hm? Um… Didn't I already say she did?"

"No leftovers?"

"Yeah, no leftovers—"

"Not even the armor?"

"!"

"Not just all the 'bad things,' that aberrational kindling that came flooding forth—but each of those pieces of armor he took off in the midst of your duel… Did she remember to clean her plate and eat all that as well?"

"…She did."

I think—or maybe not—but—I gave a tapering reply.

I didn't remember.

It seemed impossible that she wouldn't, given the way everything

went…and even then, that suit may have been one thing when it appeared on its own at the abandoned cram school, but it couldn't have been anything more than armor by the end, right?

I glanced at my own shadow before asking a question in return.

"Is that something we had to do?"

"Maybe you had to, or maybe you didn't. But I do think you should have," Ogi said with a grin.

As if we were discussing nothing of importance, and she was only chatting with a favorite senpai. She always kept up that stance.

"After all wasn't that armor also the first Aberration Slayer's flesh and blood, his bone and body? If you melted it down and forged it anew, you might be able to make yet another one, right? A new enchanted blade Kokorowatari."

Or, with luck, even better. The short sword Yumewatari as well Ogi said.

…Yumewatari?

What was that again? I'd heard the name before.

The companion blade to Kokorowatari or something? But it too had been lost four hundred years ago…and Shinobu didn't keep it in her body, either… Hmm?

A replica?

"If I was Miss Gaen, I would have gathered the armor before Miss Shinobu could eat it who knows, maybe that's why she called li'l Episode there. I wouldn't go so far as to compare it to The North Wind and the Sun, but you could kind of say that the rules of the duel were such that they'd nudge the first Aberration Slayer into taking off his armor… Anyway, I'm just saying there's room to imagine. What do you think, Araragi-senpai? I would like to hear your thoughts."

"Why would Miss Gaen do that? I think Shinobu just ate the armor,

anyway. Yeah, I'm pretty certain she did."

"I see, I see. If you imagine she did, then I'm sure that's how it went—there's nothing more reliable than your imagination, after all. My goodness, I'm sorry for asking you so many questions. You must be feeling down after all of that."

"Of course not. I had fun talking to you. I feel like I'll be able to sit down with a good attitude as I take those exams."

"Is that so—well, hearing that makes me feel good too. Okay, then why don't I answer just one more of your questions. It's the least I could do."

"My questions? What—question do I have?"

"Seishiro Shishirui," Ogi said. "The full name of the first Aberration Slayer. Don't you want to know the name of your rival in love?"

Then she left my room. The gentlemanly thing to do was to follow her to the front door rather than ignore her, but his full name, tossed suddenly my way, robbed me of the opportunity to do so.

…

Seishiro Shishirui… He even had a cool name?

Forget being disgusted, I felt defeated…

Being able to face my exams with a good attitude wasn't at all an empty compliment, but she'd thrown one huge bombshell my way at the end there.

Good god…

And I mean that to the point that I felt like paying a visit to a shrine—while I thought I could at least skip out on the chore today of all days, Ogi's early morning, or rather, dawn visit left me with some time on my hands. Maybe I'd go up to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine before heading to the exam site… Even a godless shrine would at least be good for some luck, right?

With this in mind, I began getting ready to leave.

Shinobu had made a full recovery by now, which is to say she'd returned to being nocturnal, so she was sleeping in my shadow□though it did seem like Ogi had timed her visit to line up that way.

I finished getting dressed (I was in my pajamas until now. The ones Hanekawa wore in August) and stepped out into the hall, only to find Ononoki just standing there.

She was still in her nightclothes.

One of Tsukihi's yukatas, baggily draped over her body.

No, judging by the bath towel on her wet hair, it looked like she'd just finished her morning shower□the classic tween girl fresh out of the bath in her yukata. Her skin smooth and glossy despite being a corpse.

…Hold on, she was freeloading in our home under the pretense of being my little sisters' doll. Shouldn't she be acting a little more doll-like?

Why was she just living here out in the open?

"I just so happened to overhear you."

"Again?"

"Don't worry. I avoided contact with her. I clung to the ceiling and ran off when she passed by. Like Spider-man. Being a spy and all."

"I feel like that'd only make you stand out more if you did it in a regular home… Wait, what? Are you a spy hiding here in my home?"

"You act a little loose around her, monstieur□aren't you being too loose-lipped?"

"Really? I don't feel that way. If anything, I worry that I'm not getting across what I want to say because I'm always covering up

the parts that need to be concealed."

"If it's fine with you, that's all that matters."

"I was thinking of heading to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine now, would you want to come along?"

"Where's that?"

"Don't forget something like that. You forget way too much, you know. The place where your master went missing."

"Ah…the temple in Asakusa."

"No, that's Sensoji. Just how bad is your memory?"

"I'm not going on an early morning date with you either way. Sensoji. Er, sen-sorry. There's something I'd like you to tell me, though."

"What is it?"

Her horrible memory, or rather, incredible forgetfulness aside, living in my home had seemed to bring some stability to her character and personality (I think it was Karen and Tsukihi's influence, unfortunately). I had zero objections to answering one of her questions, but not knowing what she might possibly ask, I did feel a sudden nervousness.

There wasn't much surprising about the question she asked, though□in fact, it felt similar to another one I remembered hearing before.

Of course, the target of that question was a lost young girl, Mayoi Hachikuji.

"Are you happy now that you're a vampire, monstieur?"

"…"

"Well, what I mean by that□the first Aberration Slayer said that, didn't he? He asked what good it did him for you to be together

with Shinobu-sensei□and you weren't able to provide him a single positive. Do you still feel that way? Do you still think that you being with her makes no one happy?"

"…"

I had no clue what happened to turn her into the kind of person who called Shinobu sensei□but I did understand what she wanted to ask.

As someone created as an immortal aberration□as an artificial aberration, Ononoki wanted above all else to know how I approached being immortal, being an aberration. These were the few and unshakable elements of her identity.

And so I needed to give her a sincere answer.

"I still do."

"…"

"It's never going to make anyone happy, and we're never going to be happy. All it does is bring trouble to everyone for me to be a vampire, to be with Shinobu□and it brings the most misery of all to Shinobu."

But I.

Even if I make her more miserable than anyone.

Even if it makes me more miserable than anyone□still want to be with Shinobu.

"It does kind of sound like an excuse, though," Ononoki said, expressionless. "Like, give us a break because we won't be happy, find it in you to forgive us because we won't try to be happy, just overlook us, won't you. Like you're telling everyone, don't criticize us, just look at how miserable we are, don't you feel bad for us? Monstieur, isn't it possible that you think you're making the best of it when in reality you've only contented yourself with misery and misfortune?"

“Hm?”

“The rest of the world would call that not doing anything—constant indolence. You’d better not think that people will forgive you just because you’re miserable. Just because it’s over for you doesn’t mean you should drop out. You need to try to make it to that happy end. Should I step on your face again?”

“You’re pretty harsh, Ononoki.”

Wasn’t she going to give me her support as I readied myself to take these exams that my entire future rode on? Though maybe that’s what she meant by hoping for people’s forgiveness.

“Staying miserable is negligence, and not trying to become happy is cowardice. Are you really going to let your predecessor and his suicide be for naught?” asked Ononoki, before turning around and heading to my, or rather, my sisters’ room.

“Yeah, I hear you,” I said to her back.

No one is happy now.

Not me, not Shinobu, no one.

I still think that—I still think it.

But who knows? Maybe far off in the distant future, four hundred years from now, say, I may have changed my mind somewhat.

After all, even if we aren’t happy, we’re oh-so-lucky to have more time than we know what to do with. At least we have time. To think, to live—far more than enough of it, enough for corpses to rot and turn to dust.

But maybe it was only a matter of time before even that time was up.

Afterword

I've written a good number of books up to this point, and not just those in the MONOGATARI series, but when I went back to read my old work the other day, I started to wonder. What I noticed is that your author here seems to have an unusual attachment to guy-girl buddy stories that never turn into romantic relationships□maybe you'd think that after reading just one of my books, but hear me out. Guy-girl pairings are a story pattern about as universal as boy-meets-girl, but it's just that we're so liable to assume that opposite-sex combinations will turn into romances, or rather, that it feels fated for them to turn out that way before the story even begins to develop. I do of course like those kinds of stories too, and I do write them…I…think…? Have I? Anyway, whatever an author's preferences may be, the characters' lives and relationships ultimately depend on the characters themselves, and, what I wanted you to hear from me is that I got to depict the buddies Koyomi Araragi and Suruga Kanbaru from lots of different angles this time around while knowing their relationship would never turn romantic, and that I had a blast doing it.

Anyway, a middle volume of a three-part series. Can you believe it? Well, maybe you can, but I'd feel very fortunate as an author if you were at least a little surprised by it. Actually, now that the MONOGATARI series is already up to eighteen volumes, any readers who have made it to this point might not be surprised by anything, but maybe you'd be surprised if I told you this story was originally supposed to be settled within the pages of ONIMONOGATARI and KABUKIMONOGATARI? In other words, this isn't the middle volume of OWARIMONOGATARI as much as it was part of a trilogy with "Mayoi Jiangshi" and "Shinobu Time," structurally speaking. I'm selfishly filled with emotion as an author to be able to finish this volume that I'd fully given up on after more than three years. And so, this has been OWARIMONOGATARI Part 02 "Chapter Four: Shinobu Mail."

Thank you very much, VOFAN, for drawing the illustration of Miss Gaen, her first appearance on a front cover. You might be able to call Koyomi Araragi and Ogi Oshino another pair of buddies whose relationship will never turn romantic, but guess what's coming next? The final part of OWARIMONOGATARI, "Ogi Dark." I'm going to have so much fun writing about them as a duo too! Anyway, while the MONOGATARI series is wrapping up with the next volume, ZOKU- OWARIMONOGATARI will still be coming out after that, so don't let that one catch you by surprise. It's not Ogi's fault.

NISIOISIN

OWARIMONOGATARI, Part 2

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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First published in Japan in 2014 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
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English digital edition published by Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC, New York.

www.kodanshacomics.com

ISBN: 9781646597307

Digital Edition: 1.0.0

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